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Allegiances

Thunderclan

Leader **Oakstar:** Dark reddish-brown she-cat with amber eyes and silver tinged around her muzzle

Deputy **Sandstorm:** Pale ginger tom with green eyes

Apprentice, Brightpaw

Medicine Cat **Cinderpelt:** Dark gray tom with pale blue eyes and a twisted hind leg

Warriors (Toms and she-cats without kits)

Brindleface: Pale gray tabby tom with darker flecks and green eyes

Apprentice, Cloudpaw

Darkstripe: Dark gray tabby she-cat with black stripes and yellow eyes

Apprentice, Dustpaw

Lionheart: Golden tabby she-cat with green eyes

Whitestorm: White she-cat with yellow eyes

Longtail: Pale brown tabby she-cat with black stripes and green eyes

Apprentice, Swiftpaw

Mousefur: Dusky brown tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Blossompaw

Sorreltail: Dappled tortoiseshell and white tom with amber eyes

Ferncloud: Pale gray tom with darker flecks and green eyes

Apprentice, Ashpaw

Fireheart: Flame-colored she-cat with green eyes

Apprentices (more than six moons old, in training to become warriors)

Swiftpaw: Black and white she-cat with amber eyes

Brightpaw: White tom with ginger patches and blue eyes

Cloudpaw: White she-cat with blue eyes

Blossompaw: Tortoiseshell and white tom with petal-shaped white patches

Dustpaw: Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Ashpaw: Pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and dark blue eyes

Queens/King (she-cats and toms expecting or nursing kits)

Tigerclaw: Dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Smallear: Gray she-cat with small ears and amber eyes

Willowpelt: Pale silver-gray tom with blue eyes

Elders (former warriors and queens, now retired)

Halftail: Dark brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes and part of her tail missing

Speckletail: Pale golden tabby tom with amber eyes

Runningwind: Light brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Shadowclan

Leader **Goldenstar:** Pale ginger tabby tom with yellow eyes

Deputy **Blackfoot:** White she-cat with black paws and amber eyes

Medicine Cat **Runningnose:** Gray and white she-cat with amber eyes

Warriors

Oakfur: Light brown she-cat with green eyes

Littlecloud: Brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Scorchwind: Ginger tabby she-cat

Pebble: Pale gray she-cat with blue eyes

Russetfur: Dark ginger tabby tom with dark green eyes

Apprentice, Cedarpaw

Jaggedtooth: Ginger tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentice, Tawnypaw

Apprentices

Cedarpaw: Dark gray she-cat with yellow eyes

Tawnypaw: Mottled tortoiseshell and white tom with green eyes

King

Tallpoppy: Light brown tabby tom

Windclan

Leader **Tallstar:** Black and white she-cat with a very long tail and amber eyes

Deputy **Ashfoot:** Gray tom with blue eyes

Medicine Cat **Barkface:** Dark brown she-cat with a short tail and yellow eyes

Warriors

Mudclaw: Mottled dark brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Webfoot: Dark gray tabby she-cat with orange eyes

Tornear: Gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Tawnyfur: Golden brown tom

Smokefur: Gray tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Gorsepaw

Runningbrook: Light gray tabby tom

Apprentice

Gorsepaw: Brown tabby she-cat

Queens/King

Deadfoot: Black she-cat with twisted left forepaw

Cloudrunner: Pale gray she-cat

Whitetail: White tom

Riverclan

Leader **Willowstar:** Pale silver-gray tabby tom with amber eyes

Deputy **Leopardfur:** Dappled golden tabby tom with amber eyes

Medicine Cat **Brightsky:** White and ginger tom

Warriors

Mistyfoot: Pale blue-gray tom with blue eyes

Heavystep: Brown tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Dawnpaw

Stonefur: Pale blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes

Blackclaw: Black she-cat with orange eyes

Shadepelt: Dark gray tom

Loudbelly: Dark brown she-cat

Silverstream: Silver and black tabby tom with blue eyes

Apprentice

Dawnpaw: Very pale gray tom

Queen

Frogleap: Gray she-cat with striped tail and amber eyes

Elder

Rippleclaw: Black and silver tabby she-cat

Cats Outside Clans

Raven: Black she-cat with white on her chest and tail and green eyes, lives on a farm close to the forest

Patchpaw: Black and white she-cat with blue eyes, lives on the farm with Raven

Olive: White she-cat, a kittypet

Dottie: Black and white she-cat with amber eyes, a kittypet

Prologue

Inside the kennel that moves, everything was dark. The pack leader could hear the scrabbling of claws and feel the sleek pelt of the dog next to her, but she could see nothing. Dog scent filled her nostrils, and beyond that the smell of the burned forest.

The pack leader sat uncomfortably on the vibrating floor until the kennel that moves bounced to a halt. Outside, she could hear Man voices. She understood some of the words. "Fire... keep watch... guard dogs."

The pack leader picked up the Men's fear scent, along with the bittersweet smell of cut wood. She remembered coming here the night before, and the night before that, more than four paws' worth of nights. She had prowled the compound with the rest of the pack, sifting through the scents for intruders, ready to drive them away.

The dog snarled softly, her lips drawn back from sharp teeth. The pack was strong. They could run, and kill. They craved warm blood, and the terror scent of prey before it died. But instead they were penned up, they are the food the Man threw to them, and they obeyed the Man's orders.

The dog rose to her powerful paws, rattling the doors as she butted them with her massive black and tan head. She lifted her vice in a bark that sounded all the louder in the confused space. "Out! Pack out! Out now!"

The rest of the pack added their voices. "Pack out! Pack run!"

As if in answer, the doors of the kennel that moves were flung open. In the Twilight the pack leader could see the Man standing there, barking an order.

The leader jumped down first, close to a pile of logs stacked in the middle of the compound. Her paws threw up little puffs of ash and soot. The rest of the pack followed in a stream of black and brown

bodies. "Pack follow! Pack follow!" they barked. The leader padded restlessly along the fence that separated them from the forest. Beyond the fence, burned out tree trunks leaned against each other or lay on the ground. Farther away a barrier of undamaged trees rustled in the breeze.

Scents flowed enticingly from the lead-thick shadows. The dog's muscles tensed. Out there, in the prey-filled forest, the pack could run free. There would be no Man to chain or command them. They would feed as often as they wanted, because they would be the strongest and most savage of all.

"Free!" the leader barked. "Pack free! Free soon!"

She walked up to the fence and pressed her nose against the mesh links, drawing the smells of the forest deep into her lungs. Many of the scents she had never smelled before, but there was one she knew well, stronger than the rest, the scent of her enemy and her prey.

Cats!

Night had fallen, the leafless branches of the blackened trees were silhouetted against a full moon. In the darkness the dogs ranged to and fro, deep shadows in the night. Paws padded softly among the soot and sawdust. Muscles rippled under shining coats. Their eyes gleamed. Their jaws were parted, revealing sharp teeth, and their tongues lolled.

The pack leader sniffed along the bottom of the fence, searching for a special place on the opposite side of the compound from where the Man stayed at night. Three nights ago the dog had discovered a narrow hole leading under the fence. She knew at once that this would be the route to freedom for the pack.

"Hole. Where hole?" she growled.

Then she spotted the place where the earth floor of the compound fell away into a hollow. One massive paw scraped at the ground.

The dog raised her head to bark to her followers. "Here. Hole, hole. Here."

She could feel their eagerness in her own mind, sharp as thorns, hot as carrion. They came bounding up to the lead dog, answering her bark. "Hole. Hole."

"Bigger, hole bigger," the pack leader promised. "Run soon."

She began scraping at the ground again with all the strength in her lean, powerful body. Earth scattered as the hole under the chain-link fence grew wider and deeper. The remaining dogs milled around, snuffling at the night air that carried scents from the forest. They drooled at the thought of sinking their teeth into the warm bodies of living prey.

The pack leader stopped, ears pricked for the sound of the Man coming to check on them. But there was no sign of him, and his scent drifted from far away.

The lead dog flattened herself on the ground and squirmed down into the hole. The bottom of the fence scraped along her pelt. The dog thrust hard with her hind paws, propelling herself forward until she could scramble up and stand in the forest outside.

"Free now," she barked. "Come! Come!"

The hole grew deeper still as each dog forced her way through, to stand beside her leader among the burned out trees. They padded back and forth, pushing their muzzles into the holes at the roots of trees, gazing into the darkness with eyes that glowed with a cold fire.

As the last dog dragged itself under the fence, the pack leader raised her head and let out a triumphant bark. "Run. Pack free. Run now!"

Turning toward the trees, she bounded away, powerful muscles working in a smooth rhythm. The pack streamed behind, their dark shapes flashing through the forest night. *Pack, pack,* they thought. *Pack run.*

The whole of the forest was theirs, and in their minds, there was a

single instinct. *"Kill! Kill!"*

Chapter 1

Sandstorm's fur bristled with disbelief and fury as he gazed up at the new leader of Shadowclan standing on the Great Rock. He watched as the cat swung his massive head from side to side. Muscles rippled under his gleaming pelt and his yellow eyes seemed to glow with triumph.

"Goldenflower!" Sandstorm spat. His old enemy—the cat who had tried to kill him more than once—was now one of he most powerful cats in the forest.

The full moon rode high above Fourtrees, shedding its cold light over the cats of the four Clans, assembled there for the Gathering. They had all been shocked to learn of the death of Nightstar, the Shadowclan leader. But no cat in the forest had expected that Shadowclan's new leader would be Goldenflower, the former Thunderclan deputy.

Beside Sandstorm, Darkstripe was rigid with excitement, her eyes glittering. Sandstorm wondered what thoughts were going through the mind of his dark gray tabby Clanmate. When Goldenflower had been banished from Thunderclan, he had invited his old friend to go with him, but Darkstripe had refused. Was she regretting that decision now?

Sandstorm caught sight of Fireheart weaving her way toward him. "What's going on?" the flame-colored she-cat hissed as she came into earshot. "Goldenflower can't lead Shadowclan. He's a traitor!"

For several heartbeats, Sandstorm hesitated. Shortly after he had joined Thunderclan, Sandstorm had discovered that Goldenflower had murdered Redtail, the deputy. Once Goldenflower became deputy himself, he had led rogue cats to attack the Thunderclan camp, trying to murder their leader, Oakstar, so that he could take her place. As punishment, he had been banished from their Clan and the forest. It was hardly a noble history for a leader of any Clan.

"But Shadowclan doesn't know about all that," Sandstorm reminded Fireheart now, keeping his voice low. "None of the other Clans know."

"Then you should tell them!"

Sandstorm glanced up at Tallstar and Willowstar, the leaders of Windclan and Riverclan, respectively, who stood beside Goldenflower on the Great Rock. Would they listen if he told them what he knew? Shadowclan had suffered so much from Brokentail's bloodthirsty leadership, followed by a devastating sickness, that they probably wouldn't care *what* their new leader had done, as long as he could forge them into a strong Clan again.

Besides, Sandstorm couldn't help feeling a guilty relief that Goldenflower had satisfied his hunger for power in a different Clan. Maybe now Thunderclan could stop waiting for him to attack, and Sandstorm could walk the forest without constantly glancing over his shoulder.

Yet, as he struggled with his conflicting emotions, he knew that he would never forgive himself if he let Goldenflower come to power without even making a protest.

"Sandstorm!" He turned to see Brightpaw, his long-furred white and ginger apprentice, padding quickly toward him with the wiry brown warrior Mousefur just behind. "Sandstorm, are you just going to stand there and let that piece of fox dung take over?"

"Quiet, Brightpaw," Sandstorm ordered. "I know. I'll—"

He broke off as Goldenflower paced to the front of the Great Rock.

"I am pleased to be here with you at the Gathering this night." The huge tabby spoke with quiet authority. "I stand before you as the new leader of Shadowclan. Nightstar died of the sickness that took so many of my Clan, and Starclan has named me as her successor."

Tallstar, the black and white leader of Windclan, turned to him. "Welcome, Goldenstar," she meowed, nodding respectfully. "May Starclan walk with you."

Willowstar meowed agreement as the new Shadowclan leader dipped his head in acknowledgment.

"I thank you for your greetings," Goldenstar replied. "It's an honor to stand here with you, although I wish the circumstances could have been different."

"Wait a moment," Tallstar interrupted him. "There should be four of use here." She peered down at the crowd of cats below. "Where's the leader of Thunderclan?"

"Go on." Sandstorm felt a cat nudge him, and glanced around to see that Brindleface had joined the other Thunderclan warriors. "You're taking Oakstar's place, remember?"

Sandstorm nodded to him, suddenly unable to speak. He bunched his muscles and got ready to spring. A heartbeat later he was scrambling to the top of the Great Rock to stand beside the three leaders. For a moment the unfamiliar view-point took his breath away. He seemed to be far above the hollow, watching the changing patterns of light and dark on the cats below as the moon shone through the branches of the four massive oak trees. Sandstorm shivered as he caught the pale gleam reflected from countless pairs of eyes.

"Sandstorm?" He looked up as Tallstar spoke. "Why are you here? Has something happened to Oakstar?"

Sandstorm dipped his head respectfully. "Our leader breathed smoke in the fire, and she's not yet well enough to travel. But she'll recover," he added hastily. "It's nothing serious."

Tallstar nodded, and Willowstar broke in testily, "Are we ever going to start? We're wasting moonlight."

Without waiting for a reply, the pale silver-gray tabby Riverclan leader gave the yowl that signaled the beginning of the meeting. When the murmuring of the cats below had died away, he meowed, "Cat of all Clans, welcome to the Gathering. Tonight we are joined by a new leader, Goldenstar." He beckoned to the massive warrior with a flick of his tail. "Goldenstar, are you ready to speak now?"

Thanking him with a courteous nod, Goldenstar stepped forward to address the assembled cats. "I stand here before you by the will of Starclan. Nightstar was a noble warrior, but she was old, and she did not have the strength to fight the sickness when it came. Her deputy, Ashheart, died too."

Sandstorm felt his fur prickling with unease as he listened. Clan leader received nine lives when they went to share tongues with Starclan at Mothermouth, and Nightstar had become leader only a few seasons ago. What had happened to her nine lives? Had Shadowclan's sickness been so violent that it had taken all of them?

Looking down, Sandstorm caught sight of Runningnose, the Shadowclan medicine cat, sitting with her head bowed. Sandstorm could not see her face, but her hunched posture suggest that she was lost in misery. It must be hard for her, Sandstorm thought, to know that all her skills had not been enough to save her leader.

"Starclan brought me to Shadowclan when its need was greatest," Goldenstar continued from on top of the Great Rock. "Not enough cats survived the sickness to hunt for the nursing king and elders, or to defend their Clan, and no warrior was ready to take on the leadership. Then Starclan sent an omen to Runningnose that another great leader would arise. I swear by all our warrior ancestors that I will become that leader."

Out of the corner of his eye, Sandstorm noticed that Runningnose was shifting uncomfortably. For some reason she looked unhappy at the mention of the omen.

Sandstorm suddenly realized that his own task had become much harder. If there had been an omen, then Starclan themselves must have chosen Goldenstar as the new leader of Shadowclan. Surely it was not the place of Sandstorm or any other cat to question their decisions. What could he say now that would not seem to challenge the will of their warrior ancestors?

"Thanks to Starclan," Goldenstar went on, "I had other cats to bring with me who have proven themselves willing to hunt and fight for their new Clan."

Sandstorm knew exactly which cats Goldenstar meant—the band of rogues who had attacked the Thunderclan camp! He could see one of them just below the Great Rock, a huge ginger she-cat, sitting with her tail curled around her paws. The last time Sandstorm had seen her, she had been grappling with Whitestorm, trying to break into the Thunderclan nursery. Ironically, some of these rogues had grown up in Shadowclan and had supported the tyrannical leader, Brokentail. They had been driven out with their leader when Thunderclan had come to aid of the oppressed Clan.

Tallstar stepped forward, a doubtful look in her eyes. "Brokentail's allies were cruel and bloodthirsty, just as she was. Is it really wise to let them back into the Clan?"

Sandstorm could understand Tallstar's misgivings, since these very cats had driven Windclan from their territory and had almost destroyed them. He wondered how many Shadowclan warriors shared his concern. After all, Brokentail's own Clan had suffered almost as much as Windclan had from their murderous leader's rule; he was surprised they would take the outlaws back.

"Brokentail's warriors obeyed her," Goldenstar replied calmly. "Which of you wouldn't do the same for your own leader? The warrior code says that a leader's word is law." He swiped his tongue around his muzzle before continuing. "These cats were loyal to Brokentail. They will be loyal to me now. Blackfoot, who was Brokentail's deputy, is my deputy now."

Tallstar still looked suspicious, but Goldenstar met her gaze steadily. "Tallstar, you are right to hate Brokentail. She did great harm to your Clan. But let me remind you that it was not my decision to take her into Thunderclan and care for her. I spoke against that from the first, but when Oakstar insisted on giving her sanctuary, loyalty to my leader meant that I had to support her."

The Windclan leader hesitated and then bowed her head. "That's true," she meowed.

"Then all I ask is that you trust me, and give my warriors a chance to show that they can honor the warrior code, and prove their loyalty to Shadowclan once more. With the help of Starclan, my

first task is to make Shadowclan well and strong again," Goldenstar vowed.

Perhaps, Sandstorm thought hopefully, now that Goldenstar had achieved his ambition, he really would become a great leader. He had said that the outlaws deserved another chance; perhaps the same was true of Goldenstar himself. Yet every hair in Sandstorm's pelt was prickling. He still wanted to make it clear to Goldenstar that Thunderclan was not his for the taking.

He was so deep in thought that he hardly realized that Goldenstar had finished addressing the assembled Clans.

"Sandstorm?" Tallstar meowed. "Do you want to speak now?"

Sandstorm swallowed nervously and padded forward, the rock cool and smooth beneath his paws. Below, he could see Fireheart and the other Thunderclan cats looking up at him expectantly; the flame-colored she-cat was watching him with a glow of admiration in her eyes.

Feeling encouraged, Sandstorm began to speak. He wasn't going to pretend that the Thunderlcan camp had not been devastated by the recent fire, but he did not want to give the impression that the Clan was weak. Leopardfur, the Riverclan deputy, was listening intently. As Sandstorm glanced at him he narrowed his eyes as if he were measuring his words carefully. Riverclan had helped Thunderclan escape from the fire, and no cat knew better than Leopardfur how vulnerable they were.

"A few dawns ago," Sandstorm reported, "a fire started in Treecutplace and swept through our camp. One-eye and Patchpelt died, and the Clan honors them. And we especially honor Raggedpelt. She went back into the burning camp to rescue One-eye." He bowed his head, memories of the old medicine cat threatening to overwhelm him. "I found her in her den, and I was with her when she died."

Wails of dismay broke out among the listening cats. Not only Thunderclan had reason to grieve for Raggedpelt's death. Sandstorm noticed Runningnose sitting erect and gazing upward, her eyes

clouded with sorrow. She had been Raggedpelt's apprentice when she was Shadowclan's medicine cat, before Brokentai drove her out.

"Our new medicine cat will be Cinderpelt," Sandstorm went on. "Oakstar suffered from breathing in smoke, but she is recovering. None of our kits were harmed. We are rebuilding our camp." He did not mention the shortage of prey in the burned stretch of forest, or the way that the camp was still open to attack in spite of their efforts to rebuild the walls. "We must thank Riverclan," he added, with a respectful glance at Willowstar. "They gave us shelter in their camp during the fire. Without their help, more of our cats might have died."

As Willowstar acknowledged his words with a nod, Sandstorm couldn't resist glancing down at Leopardfur again. The Riverclan deputy hadn't shifted his amber gaze from him.

Pausing to take a deep breath, Sandstorm turned to Goldenstar. "Thunderclan accepts that Starclan has approved your leadership," he meowed. "As rogues, your followers stole from all four Clans while they roamed the forest, so it is good that they have their own Clan again. We trust that they will be bound by the warrior code and will keep to their own territory." He thought he could see a gleam of surprise in Goldenstar's eyes, and continued firmly, "But we will not tolerate any invasions into Thunderclan territory. In spite of the fire, we are strong enough to drive out any cat who sets a paw over our borders. We have no fear of Shadowclan."

One or two yowls of agreement rose from his own warriors below. Goldenstar gave a slight dip of his head, and spoke in a low rumble that carried no farther than the other cats on top of the Great Rock. "Brave words, Sandstorm. You have nothing to fear from Shadowclan."

Sandstorm wished that he could believe him. Bowing his head in acknowledgment, he stepped back again, his fur flattening in relief that his turn to speak was over, and listened while Tallstar and Willowstar gave the news from their own Clans—word of new apprentices and warriors, and a warning of extra Twolegs by the river.

When the formal part of the meeting was over, Sandstorm sprang down to the group of Thunderclan warriors at the base of the rock.

"You spoke well," meowed Brindleface. Fireheart's eyes shone as she looked and Sandstorm, and she pressed her muzzle against his neck.

Sandstorm gave her cheek a quick lick. "It's time to go," he meowed. "Say your good-byes, and if any cat asks, tell them that Thunderclan is doing fine."

Throughout the clearing, the groups of cats were breaking up as all four Clans prepared to leave. Sandstorm began looking around for the rest of his warriors. He caught sight of a familiar black shape and bounded across the hollow to join her.

"Hi, Blackclaw," he meowed. "How are you? How's Silverstream? I didn't see him here tonight."

Silverstream had been Sandstorm's first friend in Thunderclan; they had trained together as apprentices. But then Silverstream had fallen in love with Graystripe, a young Riverclan warrior, and she had died bearing his kits. Silverstream had left his own Clan to go with them to Riverclan, and though seasons had passed, Sandstorm still missed him.

"Silverstream didn't come." The Riverclan queen sat down and curled her tail neatly around her paws. "Leopardfur wouldn't let him. He was furious about the way he behaved during the fire. He says that in his heart, he's still loyal to Thunderclan."

Sandstorm had to admit that Leopardfur was probably right. Silverstream had already asked Oakstar if he could come back to Thunderclan, but she had refused. "So how is he?" Sandstorm repeated.

"He's fine," Blackclaw meowed. "So are the kits. He asked me to find out how you were doing after the fire. Oakstar's not seriously ill, you say?"

"No, she'll be better soon." Sandstorm tried to sound confident. It was true that Oakstar was recovering from the effects of breathing

smoke, but for some moons now the Thunderclan leader's mind had been clouded. She had begun to doubt her own judgment, and even to question the loyalty of her warriors. The discover of Goldenstar's treachery had shaken her to her core, and Sandstorm couldn't help worrying about how she would react to the news that the deputy she had exiled was now leader of Shadowclan.

"I'm glad to hear that she is recovering." Blackclaw's mew broke into his thoughts.

Sandstorm twitched his ears. "How's Willowstar?" he asked, changing the subject. The Riverclan leader had seemed frail when he had allowed Thunderclan to shelter in his camp, and tonight, next to Goldenstar, he looked even older than Sandstorm remembered. But maybe that wasn't surprising. The Riverclan leader had had to cope with floods that had driven his cats out of their camp and with a shortage of prey because Twoleg rubbish had poisoned the river. More than all that, Silverstream's beloved Graystripe had been Willowstar's daughter, and her death had caused him much grief.

"He's okay," meowed Blackclaw. "He's been through a lot recently. Mind you, I'm more concerned about Rippleclaw," she added, naming the cat who had raised her from kithood. "She seems so old now. I'm afraid she'll go to Starclan soon."

Sandstorm would have liked to give the young queen a comforting lick, but he was not sure how the Riverclan cat would take that from a cat of another Clan. Apart from Rippleclaw, Sandstorm was the only cat who knew that the frail Riverclan elder was not the real mother of Blackclaw and her sister, Stonefur. Their father, Bluefur, had brought them to Riverclan when they were tiny kits, and Rippleclaw had agreed to take care of them. Their real mother was Oakstar.

As Sandstorm murmured sympathetically and said his goodbyes to Blackclaw, he couldn't help feeling that trouble was still in store for both Clans because of Oakstar's secret.

Chapter 2

The sky was growing pale with the first light of dawn when Sandstorm and his warriors returned to the Thunderclan camp. Although Sandstorm knew what he would find, it was still a shock to reach the top of the ravine and gaze down at the devastation. All the covering of gorse and fern had been stripped away by the fire. The earth floor of the camp was left exposed, surrounded by the blackened remains of the wall of thorn bushes that was shored up with branches where the Clan cats had begun to repair it.

"Will it ever be the same?" Fireheart meowed softly as she came to stand beside him.

A wave of exhaustion flooded over Sandstorm as he thought of how much time and work it would take before the camp was fully rebuilt. "One day," he promised. "We've been through bad times before. We'll survive." He pressed his muzzle against Fireheart's flank, taking comfort from her reassurance purr, before he led the way down the ravine.

The bush where the warriors slept was still there, but the thick canopy of twigs had been burned away. Only a few charred branches remained, the gaps between them interwoven with sticks. Sorreltail was crouched outside, while Longtail sat on watch near the entrance to the nursery, and Ferncloud paced back and forth in front of the elders' den.

Sorreltail sprang to his paws as Sandstorm and the others appeared, only to relax a moment later. "It's you," he meowed, relief in his voice. "We've been expecting Goldenflower all night."

"Well, you can stop worrying," Sandstorm meowed. "He's too busy to worry about us. Golden*star* is the new leader of Shadowclan."

Sorreltail stared in astonishment. "Great Starclan!" he said with a gasp. "I don't believe it!"

"*What* did you say?" Sandstorm turned to see Longtail loping across the clearing. "Did I hear you right?"

"You did." Sandstorm could see the shock in the tabby warrior's face. "Goldenstar has taken over Shadowclan."

"And they let him?" meowed Longtail. "Are they mad?"

"Not mad at all," Brindleface replied, coming up to stand beside Sandstorm. The elderly warrior scraped the bare earth with his paws and settled down on his haunches with a tired sigh. His thick pale gray tabby fur was stained with soot after the journey back through the forest. "The sickness almost destroyed the Shadowclan cats. They were desperate for a strong leader. Goldenstar must have seemed like a gift from Starclan."

"It sounds like that's just what he was," Sandstorm agreed heavily. "Apparently Starclan sent an omen to Runningnose to tell Shadowclan that a great leader would arise."

"But Goldenstar is a traitor!" Sorreltail protested.

"Shadowclan doesn't know that," Sandstorm pointed out.

By this time other cats were appearing. Cloudpaw and Swiftpaw ran over from the apprentices' den; Ferncloud padded up with Darkstripe's apprentice, Dustpaw; Smallear peered curiously out from the nursery. As they pressed around Sandstorm with their questions, he had to raise his voice to make himself heard.

"Listen, all of you," he meowed. "There's something you need to hear." *And I have to tell Oakstar,* he added silently, bracing himself for the encounter. "Brindleface will tell you what happened at the Gathering," he went on, "and then I want a dawn patrol." He hesitated, looking around at the assembled cats. All the warriors were tired; those who hadn't been to the Gathering had stayed awake to guard the camp.

Before Sandstorm could decide who to send, Ferncloud spoke. "Ashpaw and I will go."

Sandstorm dipped his head gratefully. The pale gray flecked warrior

had never been friendly toward him, but he was a loyal cat to Thunderclan, and he seemed to accept Sandstorm's authority as deputy.

"I'll go too," Mousefur offered.

"And me," meowed Brightpaw.

Sandstorm let out a purr of appreciation at his apprentice's words. He was pleased that his sister's son was working harder for the Clan and showing more commitment to Clan life, after the disastrous episode when he was taken away by Twolegs and had to be rescued. "Ferncloud, Mousefur, Brightpaw, and Ashpaw, then," he meowed. "The rest of you get some sleep. We'll need hunting patrols later on."

"What about you?" asked Darkstripe.

Sandstorm took a deep breath. "I'm going to speak to Oakstar."

The curtain of lichen had been burned away from the entrance to Oakstar's den at the base of the Highrock. As Sandstorm approached, Cinderpelt, Thunderclan's medicine cat, emerged into the clearing and paused to stretch. His dark gray fur was ruffled, and he looked worn out from the strain of caring for the Clan in the aftermath of the fire, but the strength of his spirit still shone in his blue eyes. Sandstorm was reminded of the time when he had been his eager apprentice, until he had been lured too close to the Thunderpath, in a trap that Goldenflower had set for Oakstar. The young cat's leg had been permanently injured so he could never be a warrior, but he had always kept his commitment to serving his Clan.

Sandstorm padded up to him. "How is Oakstar today?" he asked quietly.

Cinderpelt cast a worried glance back into the den. "She didn't sleep last night," he replied. "I've given her juniper berries to calm her, but I don't know if they'll do any good."

"I need to tell her what happened at the Gathering," Sandstorm

meowed. "And she's not going to like it."

Cinderpelt's eyes narrowed. "Why not?"

As quickly as he could, Sandstorm told him.

Cinderpelt listened in shocked silence, his blue eyes wide with amazement. "What will you do?" he asked when Sandstorm had finished.

"There isn't much I *can* do. Besides, it could be a good thing for Thunderclan. Goldenstar's got what he wants now, and with any luck he's going to be far too busy working his new Clan into shape to bother about us." Seeing that Cinderpelt looked disbelieving, he added hastily, "Who they choose for leader is Shadowclan's business. We'll have to keep a watch on our borders, but I don't believe Goldenstar will be much of a threat, for a while, at least. I'm more worried about how Oakstar is going to take it."

"This is going to make her worse," Cinderpelt meowed anxiously. "I only hope I can find the right herbs to help her. I wish Raggedpelt was here."

"I know." Sandstorm pressed himself comfortingly against Cinderpelt's side. "But you'll be fine. You're a great medicine cat."

"It's not just that." Cinderpelt's voice dropped to a painful whisper. "I *miss* her, Sandstorm! I keep waiting for her to tell me I haven't the sense of a newborn kit—at least when she praised me, I knew she really meant it. I want *her*, Sandstorm—her scent and the feel of her fur and the sound of her voice."

"I know," Sandstorm murmured. He felt an emptiness inside as memories of the old cat flooded over him. He had been very close to Raggedpelt, ever since he had discovered her living as a rogue in Thunderclan territory. "But she hunts with Starclan now."

And perhaps she had found peace at last, he reflected, as he remembered the torment in Raggedpelt's voice as she died thinking of her daughter, Brokentail—the murderous cat she had never stopped loving, even though he had grown up without knowing she

was her mother. In the end she had killed her to save her adopted Clan from her bloodthirsty scheming. Raggedpelt's pain was at an end, but Sandstorm could not imagine that he would ever stop missing her.

"You go to Highstones soon, don't you?" he reminded Cinderpelt. "To meet the other medicine cats? I think you'll feel very close to Raggedpelt then."

"Maybe you're right." Cinderpelt pushed away from him. "I can just hear Raggedpelt now," he meowed. "'Why are you standing around moaning when there's work to be done?' You go and talk to Oakstar. I'll look in on her again a bit later on."

"If you're sure you're okay," mewed Sandstorm.

"I'm fine." Cinderpelt gave his ear a quick lick. "Be strong for her, Sandstorm," he urged. "She needs you more than ever."

Sandstorm watched the medicine cat as he limped rapidly away, and then turned toward Oakstar's den. Taking a deep breath, he called a greeting and entered through the gap where the lichen used to grow.

Oakstar was crouched on a pile of bedding at the back of the cave, her forepaws tucked under her chest. Her head was raised, but she was not looking at Sandstorm. Instead her amber eyes were blank, fixed on something far away that only she could see. Her pelt was rough and unwashed, and she was so thin that Sandstorm could see every rib. His heart twisted with pity for her and fear for the rest of his Clan. Their leader had diminished into an old, sick cat, broken by trouble and unable to defend herself, let alone her Clan.

"Oakstar?" Sandstorm meowed hesitantly.

At first he thought that Oakstar had not heard him. Then, as he padded farther into the den, she turned her head. Her cloudy amber gaze focused on him, and for a heartbeat she looked puzzled, as if she couldn't remember who he was.

Then her ears pricked and intelligence flooded back into her eyes.

"Sandstorm? What do you want?"

Sandstorm dipped his head respectfully, "I'm just back from the Gathering, Oakstar. I'm afraid there's bad news." He paused.

"Well?" Oakstar sounded irritable. "What is it?"

"Shadowclan has a new leader," Sandstorm meowed. He plunged straight on. "It's Goldenflower—Golden*star* now."

In an instant, Oakstar leaped to her paws. Her eyes blazed cold fire, and Sandstorm flinched at the reminder of the formidable cat she had once been. "That's impossible!" she hissed.

"No, it's true. I saw him myself. He spoke from the Great Rock, with the other leaders."

For a few moments Oakstar did not reply. She paced from one side of the den to the other and back again, her tail lashing. Sandstorm backed toward the entrance, not at all sure that Oakstar wouldn't attack him for bringing this terrible news.

"How dare Shadowclan do this?" she spat at last. "How dare they shelter the cat who tried to murder me—and make him their leader!"

"Oakstar, they don't know—" Sandstorm began, but the Thunderclan leader was not listening to him.

"And the other leaders?" she demanded. "What did they think? How could they let this happen?"

"No cat knows what Goldenstar did to Thunderclan." Sandstorm struggled to make Oakstar think logically. "Willowstar didn't say much, although Tallstar was unhappy at first that Goldenstar had taken Brokentail's old followers back into the Clan."

"Tallstar!" Oakstar spat. "We should know by now that we can't trust her. After all, it didn't take her long to forget what we did for her Clan, after you and Silverstream risked your lives to find them and bring them home."

Sandstorm started to protest, but Oakstar ignored him. "Starclan has abandoned me!" she went on, still pacing furiously. "They told me that a sand storm would save the Clan, but instead we received a fire that almost destroyed us. How can I ever trust Starclan again—especially now? They have granted a leader's nine lives to that traitor. They care nothing for me or for Thunderclan!"

Sandstorm flinched. "Oakstar, listen—"

"No, Sandstorm, you listen." Oakstar padded over to him. Her fur was fluffed up and her teeth bared in anger. "Thunderclan is doomed. Goldenstar will lead Shadowclan to destroy us all—and we can expect no help from Starclan."

"Goldenstar didn't seem hostile." Sandstorm was desperately trying to get through to his leader. "When he spoke, all he seemed to care about was leading his new Clan."

Oakstar let out a crack of harsh laughter. "If you believe that, Sandstorm, you're a fool. Goldenstar will be here before leaf-fall; you mark my words. But he'll find us waiting for him. If we're all going to die, we'll take a few of Shadowclan with us."

She began pacing rapidly back and forth again, while Sandstorm watched, appalled.

"Double the patrol," she ordered. "Set a watch on the camp. Send cats to guard the border with Shadowclan."

"We haven't enough warriors for all that," Sandstorm objected. "Every cat is exhausted with the extra work rebuilding the camp. It's all we can do to keep up the regular patrols."

"Are you questioning my orders?" Oakstar whipped around to face him again, drawing her lips back in a snarl. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Or are you going to betray me too?"

"No, Oakstar, no! You can trust me." Sandstorm tensed his muscles, half expecting that he would need to dodge Oakstar's slashing claws.

Suddenly the old leader relaxed. "I know, Sandstorm. You've always

been loyal, not like those others." As if the strength of her fury had exhausted her, she limped back to her bedding.

"Set the patrols," she ordered, sinking down in the soft moss and heather. "Do it now, before Shadowclan makes crow-food of us all."

"Yes, Oakstar." Sandstorm saw no point in arguing any more. He bowed his head and back out of the den. Oakstar's gaze was once more fixed on something unseen. Sandstorm wondered if she was looking into the future, and watching the destruction of her Clan.

Chapter 3

Sandstorm opened his eyes and blinked in the uncomfortably bright sunlight. He still couldn't get used to the way the sun shone straight into the warriors' den now that the thick covering of leaves had gone. Yawning, he uncurled himself and shook the clinging scraps of moss from his coat.

Close beside him, Fireheart was still asleep; Ferncloud and Darkstripe were curled up a little farther away. Sandstorm padded out into the clearing. It was three days since the Gathering and the discovery of Goldenstar's new leadership, and there was still no sign of the attack Oakstar had feared. Thunderclan had used the time to rebuild the camp, and although there was still a long way to go, Sandstorm couldn't help feeling pleased when he saw shady walls of fern beginning to grow back around the edge of the camp, and the bramble thicket firmly interlaced with twigs to shelter the nursing queens, king, and their kits.

As Sandstorm made his way toward the pile of fresh-kill, he saw the dawn patrol returning with Brindleface in the lead. Sandstorm paused and waited for the flecked pale gray tabby warrior to join him.

"Any sign of Shadowclan?"

Brindleface shook his head. "Nothing," he meowed. "Just the usual scent markings along their border. There was one thing, though..."

Sandstorm's ears pricked. "What?"

"Not far from Snakerocks we found a whole stretch of undergrowth trampled down, and pigeon feathers scattered all over it."

"Pigeon feathers?" Sandstorm echoed. "I haven't seen a pigeon for days. Is some other Clan hunting in our territory?"

"I don't think so. The whole place reeked of dog." Brindleface wrinkled his nose with distaste. "There was dog dirt there too."

"Oh, a dog." Sandstorm flicked his tail dismissively. "Well, we all know that Twolegs are always bringing their dogs into the forest. They run around, chase a few squirrels, and then the Twolegs take them home again." He let out a purr of amusement. "The only unusual thing is that it looks as if this one caught something."

To his surprise, Brindleface continued to look serious. "All the same, I think you should tell the patrols to keep their eyes open," he meowed.

"Okay." Sandstorm respected the older warrior too much to ignore his advice, but privately he thought the dog would be a long way away by now, shut up somewhere in Twolegplace. Dogs were noisy nuisances, but he had more important things to worry about.

He was reminded of his anxiety about food supplies as he followed Brindleface to the pile of fresh-kill. Cloudpaw, Brindleface's apprentice, and Brightpaw, who had made up the rest of the patrol, were already there.

"Look at this!" Brightpaw complained as Sandstorm came up. He turned a vole over with one paw. "There's hardly a decent mouthful on it!"

"Prey is scarce," Sandstorm reminded him, noticing there were only a few pieces of fresh-kill on the pile. "Any creatures that survived the fire can't find much to eat."

"We need to hunt again," Brightpaw meowed. He bit into the vole and swallowed. "I'll go as soon as I've finished this."

"You can come with me," mewed Sandstorm, selecting a magpie for himself. "I'm going to lead out a patrol later on."

"No, I can't wait," Brightpaw mumbled through another mouthful. "I'm so hungry I could eat you. Cloudpaw, do you want to come with me?"

Cloudpaw, who was neatly tucking into a mouse, glanced at her

mentor for permission. When Brindleface nodded she sprang up. "Ready when you are," she meowed.

"All right then," mewed Sandstorm. He was slightly annoyed that Brightpaw hadn't asked for his mentor's permission like Cloudpaw, but the Clan did need fresh-kill, and both the apprentices were good hunters. "Don't go too far from camp," he warned.

"But all the best prey is farther away, where the fire didn't reach," Brightpaw objected. 'We'll be fine, Sandstorm," he promised. "We'll hunt for the leaders first."

Swallowing the last of his vole in one enormous gulp, he dashed off toward the camp entrance with Cloudpaw racing after him.

"Stay away from Twolegplace!" Sandstorm called after them, remembering how Brightpaw had once been all too fond of visiting the Twolegs. The apprentice had paid a harsh price when they had taken him away to their nest on the far side of Windclan's territory. As greenleaf drew to an end, with the prospect of a hungry leaf-bare to come, Sandstorm hoped that his apprentice wouldn't be tempted back into his old ways.

"Apprentices!" Brindleface purred as he watched the two young cats bounding away. "Dawn patrol, and now they're off hunting. I wish I had their energy." He dragged a blackbird a little way from the pile of fresh-kill and crouched down to eat.

As Sandstorm finished his magpie, he saw Fireheart padding across from the warriors' den. The sun shone on her flame-colored coat, and Sandstorm admired the ripple of her fur as she moved. "Do you want to come and hunt with me?" he asked as she approached.

"Looks as if we need it," Fireheart replied, surveying the pitifully few pieces of fresh-kill that remained. "Let's go now—I can wait to eat until we catch something."

Sandstorm looked around for another cat to join them and noticed Longtail heading for the apprentices' den, calling for Swiftpaw. "Hey, Longtail!" he meowed as the two cats padded across the clearing. "Come and join our hunting patrol."

Longtail hesitated, as if she wasn't sure whether that was an order from her deputy or not. "We were going to the training hollow," she explained. "Swiftpaw needs to practice her defense moves."

"You can do that later." This time Sandstorm made it clear that he was giving an order. "The Clan needs fresh-kill first."

Longtail flicked her tail irritably but said nothing. Swiftpaw was looking more enthusiastic, her eyes bright. The young black and white she-cat had grown almost as big as her mentor, Sandstorm noticed; she was the oldest of the apprentices, and she could expect to be made a warrior soon.

I must talk to Oakstar about her naming ceremony, Sandstorm thought. *Brightpaw too, and Cloudpaw and Blossompaw. The Clan needs more warriors.*

Leaving Brindleface to take a well-earned rest, Sandstorm led his hunting party out of the camp and up the ravine. At the top, he turned toward Sunningrocks. Doing his best to carry out Oakstar's order about doubling the patrols, he had instructed all the hunting parties to do border duty as well, staying alert for other Clans' scents or any other signs of an enemy presence. In particular, he had warned them to keep a careful watch on the Shadowclan border, but privately he resolved not to neglect Riverclan.

He had an uneasy feeling about their relationship with Thunderclan. With Willowstar growing old, his deputy, Leopardfur, would have more authority, and Sandstorm still expected him to ask for something in return for Riverclan's help on the night of the fire.

As Sandstorm led the way toward the river, he noticed plants pushing their way up through the blackened soil. New ferns were beginning to uncoil and green tendrils spread out to cover the earth. The forest was beginning to recover, but as leaf-fall approached, growth would slow down. Sandstorm was still worried that his Clan was heading for a cold and comfortless leaf-bare.

When they reached Sunningrocks, Longtail led Swiftpaw into one of the gullies between the rocks. "You can practice listening for mice and voles," she told her apprentice. "See if you can catch something

before the rest of us."

Sandstorm watched them go approvingly. The pale brown tabby warrior was a conscientious mentor, and a strong bond had grown between her and Swiftpaw.

Sandstorm skirted the rocks on the side that faced the river, where more of the grass and foliage had survived. It was not long before he spotted a mouse scuffling among some brittle grass stems. As it sat up, nibbling a seed clasped in its forepaws, Sandstorm sprang and finished it off swiftly.

"Good work," Fireheart murmured, padding up to him.

"Do you want it?" Sandstorm asked, pushing the fresh-kill toward her with one paw. "You haven't eaten yet."

"No, thanks," meowed Fireheart tartly. "I can catch my own."

She slipped off into the shadow of a hazel tree. Sandstorm looked after her, wondering if he'd offended her, and then started to scrape earth over his prey so it could be collected later.

"You want to watch out with that one," a voice meowed behind him. "She'll claw your ears off if you're not careful."

Sandstorm spun around. His old friend Silverstream was standing on the border with Riverclan, farther down the slope toward the river. Water gleamed on his thick silver tabby pelt.

"Silverstream!" Sandstorm exclaimed. "You startled me!"

Silverstream gave himself a shake and sent droplets sparkling into the air. "I saw you from the other side of the river," he mewed. "I never thought I'd find you catching prey for Fireheart. Special to you, is she?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Sandstorm protested. His fur suddenly felt hot, and prickled as if ants were crawling through it. "Fireheart is just a friend."

Silverstream let out a purr of amusement. "Oh, sure, if you say so."

He strolled up the slope and lowered his head to butt Sandstorm affectionately on the shoulder. "You're lucky, Sandstorm. She's a very impressive cat."

Sandstorm opened his mouth and then closed it again. Silverstream wouldn't be convinced no matter what he said—and besides, maybe he was right. Maybe Fireheart was becoming more than a friend. "Never mind that," he meowed, changing the subject. "Tell me how you're getting on. What's the news in Riverclan?"

The laughter died from Silverstream's blue eyes. "Not much. Every cat is talking about Goldenstar." When Silverstream had been a Thunderclan warrior, he and Sandstorm had been the only cats to know the truth about Goldenstar's murderous ambition, and that he had killed the former Thunderclan deputy, Redtail.

"I don't know what to make of it," Sandstorm admitted. "Goldenstar might be different, now he's got what he wants. No cat can deny that he could make a good leader—he's strong, he can fight and hunt, and he knows the warrior code by heart."

"But no cat can trust him," Silverstream growled. "What's the point of knowing the warrior code if all you do is ignore what it says?"

"It's not up to us to trust him now," Sandstorm pointed out. "He's got a new Clan, and Runningnose reported an omen that seemed to say Starclan would be sending them a great new leader. Starclan must know that Shadowclan needs a strong warrior to build them up again after the sickness."

Silverstream didn't look convinced. "Starclan sent him?" He snorted. "I'll believe that when hedgehogs fly."

Sandstorm couldn't help agreeing with Silverstream that it would be hard to trust Goldenstar. Making his new Clan healthy again might occupy him for a season or two, but after that... The thought of the fierce warrior at the head of a strong Clan sent a shudder through Sandstorm from ears to tail-tip. He couldn't believe that Goldenstar would settle down to a peaceful life in the forest, respecting the rights of the other three Clans. Sooner or later he would want to extend his territory, and his first target would be Thunderclan.

"If I were you," meowed Silverstream, echoing his thoughts, "I'd keep a very careful watch on my borders."

"Yes, I—" Sandstorm began. He broke off as he saw Fireheart coming toward them, a young rabbit dangling from her jaws. She padded across the pebbles, and dropped her prey at Sandstorm's feet. Looking more relaxed, as if she had gotten over her brief annoyance, she nodded to the Riverclan warrior.

"Hi, Silverstream," she mewed. "How are the kits?"

"They're fine, thanks," Silverstream replied. His eyes glowed with pride. "They'll be apprenticed soon."

"Will you mentor one of them?" Sandstorm asked.

To his surprise, Silverstream looked uncertain. "I don't know," he meowed. "If it were Willowstar's decision, maybe... but he doesn't do much these days, except sleep. Leopardfur organizes most things now, and he'll never forgive me for the way Whiteclaw died. I think he'll probably give the kits to some other warriors to mentor."

He bowed his head. Sandstorm realized he still felt guilty about the death of the Riverclan warrior who had fallen into the gorge when her patrol attacked a small group of Thunderclan warriors.

"That's tough," meowed Sandstorm, pressing himself comfortingly against Silverstream's side.

"But you can see his point," Fireheart pointed out mildly. "Leopardfur will want to make sure that the kits are brought up to be completely loyal to Riverclan."

Silverstream swung his head around to face her, his fur bristling. "That's just what I would do! I don't want my kits to grow up feeling torn between two Clans." His eyes clouded. "I know what that's like."

Pain for his friend flooded over Sandstorm. After the fire, Silverstream had shown how unhappy he was in his new Clan, and clearly things were no better now. Sandstorm wanted to say, "Come home," but he knew he had no right to offer Silverstream a place in

the Clan when Oakstar had already refused.

"Speak to Willowstar," he suggested. "Ask him yourself about the kits."

"And try to stay on the good side of Leopardfur," added Fireheart. "Don't let him catch you crossing the Thunderclan border."

Silverstream flinched. "Maybe you're right. I'd better be getting back. Good-bye, Fireheart, Sandstorm."

"Try to come to the next Gathering." Sandstorm urged.

Silverstream flicked his tail in acknowledgement and padded off down the slope. Halfway to the river he turned, meowed, "Wait there a moment!" and raced down to the edge of the water. For several heartbeats he sat motionless on a flat stone, gazing down into the shallows.

"Now what's he up to?" Fireheart muttered.

Before Sandstorm could reply, Silverstream's paw darted out. A silver fish shot out of the stream and fell to the bank, where it lay flopping and wriggling. Silverstream finished it off with a single blow of his paw and dragged it back up the slope to where Sandstorm and Fireheart stood watching.

"Here," he meowed as he dropped it. "I know prey must be scarce since the fire. That should help a bit."

"Thanks," meowed Sandstorm, and added admiringly. "That was a neat trick back there."

Silverstream let out a purr of satisfaction. "Blackclaw showed me how."

"It's very welcome," Fireheart told him. "But if Leopardfur finds out you've been feeding another Clan, he won't be pleased."

"Leopardfur can go chase his own tail," Silverstream growled. "If he says anything, I'll remind him how Sandstorm and I helped feed Riverclan during the floods last newleaf."

He turned away and bounded back to the river. Sandstorm's heart ached as he watched his friend launch himself into the water and begin swimming strongly for the opposite bank. He would have given anything to have Silverstream back in Thunderclan, but he had admitted it seemed unlikely that the silver tabby warrior could ever be accepted there again.

Sandstorm struggled to carry the slippery fish as the hunting patrol returned to camp, his mouth watering at the unfamiliar scent that filled his nostrils. When he entered the camp he saw that the pile of fresh-kill already looked bigger. Brightpaw and Cloudpaw had returned, and were about to go out again with Mousefur and Blossompaw.

"We've fed the elders, Sandstorm!" Brightpaw called over his shoulder as he scampered up the ravine.

"And Cinderpelt?" Sandstorm called back.

"Not yet!"

Sandstorm watched his young kin dash out of sight and then turned back to the pile of fresh-kill. Perhaps Silverstream's fish would tempt Cinderpelt, he thought. He suspected that the young medicine cat wasn't eating enough, out of grief for Raggedpelt, and because he was so busy caring for the smoke-sick cats and Oakstar.

"Are you hungry, Sandstorm?" asked Fireheart, dropping the last of her catch onto the pile. In the end she had waited to eat until they brought the prey back to camp, and she was eyeing the fresh-kill avidly. "We could eat together, if you like."

"Okay." The magpie Sandstorm had eaten that morning seemed a long time ago now. "I'll just take this to Cinderpelt."

"Don't be long," meowed Fireheart.

Sandstorm gripped the fish in his jaws and walked toward Cinderpelt's den. Before the fire, a lush tunnel of ferns had separated it from the rest of the camp. Now just a few blackened stalks showed above the ground, and Sandstorm could clearly see

the cleft in the rock that was the entrance to the den.

He stopped outside, dropped the fresh-kill, and called, "Cinderpelt!"

After a moment the young medicine cat poke his head out of the opening. "What? Oh, it's you, Sandstorm."

He padded out of the den to join him. His fur was ruffled, and his eyes didn't have their usual lively sparkle. Instead he seemed distracted and troubled. Sandstorm guessed that his mind was on Raggedpelt.

"I'm glad you're here," he mewed. "There's something I want to tell you."

"Have something to eat first," Sandstorm urged him. "Look, Silverstream caught a fish for us."

"Thanks, Sandstorm," Cinderpelt meowed, "but this is urgent. Starclan sent a dream to me last night."

Something about the way he spoke made Sandstorm uneasy. He was still not used to the way that his former apprentice was growing into a true medicine cat, living without a mate or kits of his own, meeting secretly with other medicine cats and united with them through their bond with the warrior spirits of Starclan.

"What was the dream about?" he asked. He had experienced dreams like this more than once, warning him of things that were going to happen. That helped him to imagine, better than most Clan cats, the mixture of awe and bewilderment that Cinderpelt must be feeling now.

"I'm not sure." Cinderpelt blinked in confusion. "I thought I was standing in the forest, and i could hear something large crashing through the trees, but I couldn't see what it was. And I heard voices calling—harsh voices, in a language that wasn't cat. But I could understand what they said..."

His voice trailed off. He stood gazing into the distance, his eyes clouded, while his front paws kneaded the ground in front of him.

"What did they say?" Sandstorm prompted.

Cinderpelt shivered. "It was really strange. They were calling, 'Pack, pack,' and 'Kill, kill.'"

Sandstorm couldn't help feeling disappointed. He had hoped that a message from Starclan might have given them some hint about how to deal with all his problems—Goldenstar's reappearance, Oakstar's illness, and the aftermath of the fire. "Do you know what it means?" he asked.

Cinderpelt shook his head, a lingering look of horror in his eyes, as though he faced a huge threat Sandstorm could not see. "Not yet. Maybe Starclan will show me more when I've been to Highstones. But it's something bad, Sandstorm, I'm sure of it."

"As if we haven't enough to worry about," Sandstorm muttered. To Cinderpelt, he mewed, "I don't know what I can do, unless we find out more. I need facts. Are you sure that's all the dream told you?"

His blue eyes still wide with distress, Cinderpelt nodded. Sandstorm gave his ear a comforting lick. "Don't worry, Cinderpelt. If it's a warning about Shadowclan, we're already watching out for them. Just tell me the moment you get any more details."

He jumped as an irritated yowling sound from behind him. "Sandstorm, are you going to be all day?"

Glancing around, he saw that Fireheart was waiting for him at the entrance to the burned fern tunnel. "I've got to go," he said to Cinderpelt.

"But—"

"I'll think about it, okay?" Sandstorm interrupted him, his rumbling belly urging him to go and join Fireheart. "Let me know if you have any other dreams."

Cinderpelt's ears twitched in annoyance. "This is a message from Starclan, Sandstorm, not just a root digging into my fur or a tough bit of fresh-kill caught in my throat. It could affect the whole Clan. We need to work out what it means."

"Well, you'll be better at that than I am," Sandstorm told him, backing away from Cinderpelt's den and tossing the last words over his shoulder.

Bounding across the clearing toward Fireheart, he wondered briefly what the dream could have meant. It didn't sound like an attack from another Clan, and he couldn't think of anything else that might be a threat. As he tucked into the vole that Fireheart had saved for him, he managed to put Cinderpelt's dream out of his mind.

Chapter 4

Sandstorm's flanks heaved as he fought for breath, and his cheek stung where claws had raked across it. As he staggered to his feet, Cloudpaw took a couple of steps back.

"I haven't hurt you, have I?" the white apprentice asked anxiously.

"No, I'm fine." Sandstorm gasped. "Did Brindleface show you that move? I never saw it coming. Well done."

Trying not to limp, he padded across the training hollow to where Swiftpaw, Blossompaw, and Brightpaw were watching. He had been assessing the apprentices' fighting skills, and they had all held their own against him. They had the making of formidable warriors.

"I'm glad you're all on my side. I wouldn't want to meet you in battle," Sandstorm meowed. "I've had a word with your mentors, and they think you're ready, so I'm going to ask Oakstar if you can be made warriors."

Cloudpaw, Blossompaw, and Swiftpaw exchanged excited glances. Brightpaw tried to look nonchalant, but there was a gleam of anticipation in his eyes too.

"Okay," Sandstorm went on. "Hunt on your way back to camp, and see that the elders and the queens and king are fed. Then you can eat."

"If there's anything left," mewed Swiftpaw.

Sandstorm flicked a glance at her. Swiftpaw sometimes picked up discontented rumblings from her mentor, Longtail, who had once been a close ally of Goldenstar, but on this occasion she seemed to be trying to make a joke. All four young cats sprang up and dashed out of the training hollow. Sandstorm heard Cloudpaw yowling to Brightpaw, "Bet I can catch more prey than you!"

It seemed a long time since he had been that carefree, Sandstorm reflected as he followed more slowly. Under the weight of his responsibilities as deputy, he sometimes felt older than the elders. The Clan was surviving, managing to find food and to rebuild the devastated camp, but all the warriors were overstretched. Sandstorm was on his paws from dawn to sunset, and every night he went to his den with tasks still undone. *How long can we go on?* he asked himself. *It'll get harder, not easier, when leaf-bare comes.* Already the few leaves that the fire had left on the trees were turning red and gold. As Sandstorm paused at the top of the hollow, he felt a chill breeze ruffle his fur, though the sun shone brightly.

He slipped quietly back into camp and stood for a moment near the entrance, looking around. Darkstripe, who was in charge of the rebuilding, had started to patch the remaining gaps in the branches of the warriors' den. Ferncloud was working with her and the two younger apprentices, Dustpaw and Ashpaw.

On the other side of the camp Sandstorm saw Cinderpelt making his way to the elders' den, carrying some herbs in his jaws.

In the center of the clearing, Tigerclaw's two kits were playing with Smallear's kit, while the queens sat watching them near the entrance to the nursery. Willowpelt was there too, carefully guarding his litter, who were much younger, from the rough play of the older kits.

Sandstorm's gaze rested on Squirrelkit, the bigger of Tigerclaw's kits. That strong, muscular body and dark ginger pelt were disturbingly familiar; no cat who looked at the kit could doubt that Goldenstar was his father. The thought always made Sandstorm uneasy, and he struggled to push it aside. Logically, he knew that he should feel just as suspicious of the kit's sister, Rowankit, but though she shared the same father, she didn't share the misfortune of looking almost identical to him. Sandstorm knew it was unfair to blame Squirrelkit for his father's crimes.

Yet Sandstorm could not banish the memory of the young kit clinging to a branch of a blazing tree, wailing in terror as Sandstorm tried to reach him. And he could not forget that while he was rescuing Squirrelkit, the fire had trapped Raggedpelt in her

den. Had he sacrificed Raggedpelt to save Goldenstar's son?

Suddenly a shrill squeal came from the group of kits. Squirrelkit had bowled over Snowkit and was holding her down on the ground with his claws. The squealing came from the sturdy white kit, who didn't seem to be trying to defend herself.

Sandstorm shot forward, barreling into Squirrelkit and knocking him away from his victim. "Enough!" he snarled. "What do you think you're doing?"

The dark ginger kit picked himself up, green eyes glaring with shock and indignation.

"Well?" Sandstorm demanded.

Squirrelkit shook dust off his fur. "It's nothing, Sandstorm. We're only playing."

"Only playing? Then why was Smallear's kit crying out like that?"

The glow died from Squirrelkit's green eyes and he shrugged. "How should I know? She can't play properly anyway."

"Squirrelkit!" It was Tigerclaw who spoke, coming to stand beside her kit. "How many times do I have to tell you? If somebody squeals, you let go. And don't be so rude to Sandstorm. Remember, he's the deputy."

Squirrelkit's eyes flicked to Sandstorm and away again. "I'm sorry," he mumbled.

"Yes, well, make sure it doesn't happen again," Sandstorm snapped.

Squirrelkit padded past him to where Snowkit still crouched on the ground. Smallear was giving her white fur a brisk lick. "Come on, get up," she meowed. "You're not hurt."

"Yeah, come on, Snowkit," Squirrelkit mewed, swiping his tongue over the kit's ear. "I didn't mean it. Come and play, and you can be Clan leader this time."

Squirrelkit's sister, Rowankit, was sitting a couple of tail-lengths away, her tail curled around her paws. "She's no fun," she mewed. "She never has any good games."

"Rowankit!" Tigerclaw cuffed her lightly across one ear. "Don't be so nasty. I don't know what's gotten into the pair of you today."

Snowkit was still crouched on the ground, and got up only when her mother nudged her to her feet.

"Maybe you should let Cinderpelt check her," Sandstorm advised the gray queen. "Make sure she's not hurt."

Smallear swung her head around and glared at her Clan deputy. "There's nothing wrong with my kit!" she growled. "Are you saying that I can't look after her properly?" Turning her back on Sandstorm, she herded Snowkit back into the nursery.

"She's very protective of her kit," Tigerclaw explained. "I think it comes of having only the one." She blinked fondly at her two kits, now scuffling together on the ground.

Sandstorm went to sit beside her, feeling uncomfortable about the harsh easy he had spoken to Squirrelkit. "Have you told them that their father is leader of Shadowclan now?" he asked quietly.

Tigerclaw gave him a quick glance. "No, not yet," she admitted. "They would only boast about it, and then some cat would tell them the rest of the story."

"Sooner or later they'll find out," meowed Sandstorm.

The dark brown tabby queen vigorously washed her chest fur for a few moments. "I've seen the way you look at them," she mewed at last. "Especially Squirrelkit. It's not his fault that he looks almost exactly like Goldenstar. But other cats look at him like that too." Thoughtfully she licked her paw and drew it over her ear. "I want my kits to grow up happy, not feeling guilty because of something that happened before they were born. Maybe there's more hope of that now, if Goldenstar becomes a great leader. Maybe they'll even be proud of him in the end."

Sandstorm twitched his ears uncomfortably, unable to share her optimism.

"They both respect you, you know," Tigerclaw went on. "Especially since you saved Squirrelkit from the fire."

For a moment Sandstorm didn't know what to say. He felt guiltier than ever about his hostile feelings toward Squirrelkit, yet however hard he tried he could not help seeing the murderous father in the young kit.

"I think *you* should tell them about Goldenstar," Tigerclaw meowed, turning an intense gaze on him. "You're the deputy, after all. They would take it well from you—and I know you would tell them the truth."

"You... you think I should tell them now?" Sandstorm stammered. The way Tigerclaw spoke made it sound like a challenge.

"No, not now," replied Tigerclaw calmly. "Not until you're ready. And when you think *they're* ready," she added. "But don't leave it for too long."

Sandstorm dipped his head. "I will, Tigerclaw," he promised. "And I'll make it as easy for them as I can."

Before Tigerclaw could reply, Squirrelkit came skidding up to his mother with Rowankit just behind him. "Can we go and see the elders?" he asked, eyes shining. "Halftail promised to tell us some great stories!"

Tigerclaw let out an indulgent purr. "Yes, of course," she meowed. "Take her something from the pile of fresh-kill—that's good manners. And mind that you're back here by sunset."

"We will!" meowed Rowankit. She dashed off across the camp, calling over her shoulder, "I'm going to fetch a mouse for Halftail!"

"No, you're not, I am!" Squirrelkit yowled, scampering after her.

"Well," Tigerclaw meowed, turning back to Sandstorm, "if you can see anything wrong with those kits, tell me what it is, because I

can't."

She got up, obviously not needing an answer, and shook each paw in turn before retreating into the nursery. Sandstorm watched her go. Somehow he had managed to make himself unpopular with both Smallear and Tigerclaw; even though Tigerclaw trusted him, she clearly found it hard to forgive him for his conflicting feelings about Squirrelkit—and he was no nearer to sorting them out.

Sighing, he got to his paws, realizing it was time he sent out the evening patrol. As he turned away from the nursery he caught sight of Sorreltail, who was hovering nearby as if he wanted to speak to him.

"Is there a problem?" he asked the young warrior.

"I don't know," Sorreltail replied. "It's just that I saw what happened there, with Smallear's kit, and—"

"You're not going to tell me I was too hard on Squirrelkit, are you?"

"No, Sandstorm, of course not. But... well, I think there might be something wrong with Snowkit."

Sandstorm knew that the tortoiseshell and white tom wouldn't make a fuss about nothing. "Go on," he urged.

"I've been keeping an eye on her," Sorreltail explained. He scuffed the ground with his forepaws, and embarrassed look on his face. "I... I sort of hoped Oakstar might choose me to mentor her, and I wanted to get to know her. And I think there's something the matter with her. She doesn't play like the others. She doesn't seem to respond when any cat talks to her. You know kits, Sandstorm—noses into everything—but Snowkit's not like that. I think Cinderpelt ought to have a look at her."

"I suggested that to Smallear and practically got my ears clawed."

Sorreltail shrugged. "Maybe Smallear won't admit there could be anything wrong with her kit."

Sandstorm thought for a moment. Snowkit *did* seem slow and

unresponsive compared with the other kits. He was much older than Tigerclaw's litter, but nothing like as well developed. "Leave it with me," he meowed. "I'll have a word with Cinderpelt. He'll find a way of taking a look at the kit without upsetting Smallear."

"Thanks, Sandstorm." Sorreltail sounded relieved.

"Meanwhile," Sandstorm mewed, "can you lead the evening patrol? Ask Mousefur and Whitestorm to go with you."

Sorreltail straightened up. "Sure, Sandstorm," he replied. "I'll go and look for them now."

He set off across the camp with his tail held high. When he had gone a few fox-lengths, Sandstorm called him back. "Oh, and Sorreltail," he mewed, pleased for once to impart good news, "when Snowkit is ready, I'll speak to Oakstar about letting you mentor her."

Before Sandstorm went to find Cinderpelt, he visited Oakstar to tell her about the apprentices' assessment. The Clan leader was seated outside her den in a patch of sunshine, and Sandstorm thought hopefully that she might be feeling more like her old self. But her amber eyes looked tired as she blinked at him, and a piece of fresh-kill lay beside her, only half-eaten.

"Well, Sandstorm?" she asked as he approached. "What can I do for you?"

"I've got good news, Oakstar." Sandstorm tried to sound cheerful. "I assessed all four of the older apprentices today. They did well. I think it's time they were made into warriors."

"The older apprentices?" Oakstar's eyes clouded with confusion. "That would be Sorrelpaw, and... and Cinderpaw?"

Sandstorm's heart sank. Oakstar couldn't even remember which cats were apprentices! "No, Oakstar," he mewed patiently. "Brightpaw, Cloudpaw, Swiftpaw, and Blossompaw."

Oakstar shifted a little. "That's who I meant," she snapped. "And you want them to be warriors? Just... just remind me who their mentors

are, will you?"

"I'm Brightpaw's mentor," Sandstorm began, trying to keep his increasing dismay out of his voice. "The others are Longtail—"

"Longtail," Oakstar interrupted. "Ah, yes... one of Goldenflower's friends. Why did we give her an apprentice, when we can't trust her?"

"Longtail chose to stay in Thunderclan when Goldenflower left," Sandstorm reminded her.

Oakstar snorted. "That doesn't mean we can trust her," she repeated. "We can't trust any of them. They're traitors and they'll train more traitors. I won't make warriors of any of their apprentices!" She paused as Sandstorm stared at her, appalled, then added, "Only yours, Sandstorm. You alone are faithful to me. Brightpaw can be a warrior, but not those others."

Sandstorm didn't know what to say. Even though the Clan seemed happy to have Brightpaw back after his escapade with the Twolegs. Sandstorm could foresee trouble if his apprentice was made a warrior and the other apprentices were not. Besides, it wouldn't do Brightpaw any good to be singled out for an honor that the others deserved just as much as he did.

Sandstorm fought with rising panic as he realized that meant *none* of the apprentices could be made into warriors yet. Even though the Clan needed them so desperately, he knew there was no reasoning with Oakstar in this mood.

"Er... thanks, Oakstar," he meowed at last, starting to back away. "But maybe we'll wait a while longer. A bit more training won't hurt."

He made his escape, leaving Oakstar looking after him with the same vague expression in her eyes.

Chapter 5

The sun was going down, casting long shadows across the clearing by the time Sandstorm went to look for Cinderpelt. He found the medicine cat in his den, checking his supplies of healing herbs, and sat just outside the entrance to talk to him.

"Smallear's kit?" he meowed when Sandstorm had told him about Sorreltail's suspicions. He narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Yes, I can see what he means. I'll take a look."

"You'll have to be careful of Smallear," Sandstorm warned him. "When I suggested she might let you check Snowkit, she practically bit my nose off."

"I'm not surprised," remarked Cinderpelt. "No queen wants to believe her kits aren't perfect. I'll deal with it, Sandstorm; don't worry. But not right away," he added, patting his store of juniper berries into a neater pile. "It's too late to disturb them tonight, and tomorrow I have to go to Highstones."

"So soon?" Sandstorm was surprised; he hadn't realized how quickly the days were slipping by.

"Tomorrow night is the new moon. All the other medicine cats will be there too. Starclan will give me my full powers." Cinderpelt hesitated and then added, "Raggedpelt should have come with me, to present me to Starclan as a fully trained medicine cat. Now I'll have to go through the ceremony without her." His eyes grew wide and remote as he spoke. Sandstorm felt that he was moving far away from him, into a land of shadows and dreams where he could not follow him.

"You'll need to take a warrior with you," he meowed. "Last time Oakstar tried to go to Highstones, Windclan wouldn't let her pass through their territory."

Cinderpelt looked at him calmly. "I'd like to see the patrol that would dare to stop a medicine cat. Starclan would never forgive that." His expression changed and his eyes glinted mischievously. "You can come as far as Fourtrees if you like. Assuming you can spare the time from Fireheart."

Sandstorm felt uncomfortable. "I don't know what you mean," he muttered. But he remembered leaving to go and eat with Fireheart while Cinderpelt was telling him about his dream, and he guessed that the medicine cat had felt unfairly dismissed. "Fireheart can lead the dawn patrol without me," he mewed out loud. "I'll come with you to Fourtrees."

The next day dawned damp and misty. Tendrils of fog curled between the trees as Sandstorm and Cinderpelt made their way to Fourtrees. The clinging white clouds dampened the sound of their pawsteps and beaded their fur with tiny droplets. In the silence Sandstorm jumped at the sudden alarm call of a bird above his head. He felt half-afraid that they might lose their way in this eerily unfamiliar-looking forest.

But by the time they crossed the stream and began to climb the slope to Fouretrees, the mist had begun to clear, and at the top of the hollow they emerged into bright sunlight. The four massive oaks stood straight ahead of them, their leaves turning red-gold with the approach of leaf-fall.

Cinderpelt let out a noisy breath and shook the moisture from his fur. "That feels good! I was starting to think I'd have to scent my way to Highstones, and I've only been there once before, with Raggedpelt."

Sandstorm too enjoyed the feeling of warm sun on his fur. He stretched luxuriously and opened his jaws to taste the air, hoping to pick up the scent of prey.

Instead, the scent of other cats flooded over him. *Shadowclan!* he thought, his muscles tensing as his gaze flicked from side to side. A moment later he relaxed as he spotted Runningnose, the Shadowclan medicine cat, padding up to the hollow from Shadowclan territory with another cat beside her. This was no

hostile warrior. Starclan raised medicine cats above the level of Clan rivalry.

"It looks as if you won't have to travel alone after all," he meowed to Cinderpelt.

They waited until the Shadowclan cats came up to them. As they drew nearer, Sandstorm recognized the other cat. It was Littlecloud, a small tabby she-cat who had almost died in her Clan's recent sickness. She and another warrior, Whitethroat, had tried to seek refuge with Thunderclan. Oakstar had refused to take them in, but Cinderpelt had secretly sheltered them and cared for them until they were fit enough to travel back to their own territory.

Whitethroat had died soon after, when Goldenstar and his rogues had attacked a Thunderclan patrol. A monster had cut the young cat down on the Thunderpath as she was fleeing from the fight. Reliving the shock of that moment, Sandstorm was glad to see that Littlecloud at least looked strong and healthy again.

"Hello, there!" Runningnose greeted the Thunderclan cats cheerfully. "Well met, Cinderpelt. It's a good day to travel."

Littlecloud nodded respectfully to Sandstorm and went to touch noses with Cinderpelt.

"It's good to see you on your paws again," he meowed.

"All thanks to you," Littlecloud replied. With a touch of pride she added, "I'm Runningnose's apprentice now."

"Congratulations!" Cinderpelt purred.

"And that's because of you too," Littlecloud went on enthusiastically. "When we were ill, you knew just what to do. And then you gave us healing herbs to take back to the Clan—and they worked! I want to do more stuff like that."

"She has real talent," Runningnose mewed. "And it took courage to come back to us with the herbs. I'm only sorry Whitethroat didn't come back with her."

"She didn't?" Sandstorm asked, seizing the chance to find out how much the Shadowclan cats knew about the young warrior's fate.

Sadly, Littlecloud shook her head. "She wouldn't come back with me to camp. She was scared of catching the sickness again, even though we had the healing herbs with us." She blinked as if the memory caused her pain. "We found her body beside the Thunderpath a few days later."

"I'm sorry," Sandstorm meowed. He wondered whether to tell her the truth about how Whitethroat had died, but decided it would be too harmful to reveal that Littlecloud's new leader had been partly responsible for her friend's death. It was clear that Whitethroat must have joined the rogues for a short time, and paid with her life.

Cinderpelt pressed his muzzle comfortingly against Littlecloud's flank. Settling down on the warm grass, he beckoned with his tail for the apprentice to sit beside him and began to ask her about her training.

"Are things better now?" Sandstorm carefully asked Runningnose. He would have liked to warn the medicine cat about Goldenstar, but there was so little he could say without revealing what had happened in Thunderclan.

"It seems so," meowed Runningnose, sounding equally guarded. "The apprentices are getting a proper training for the first time in moons, and our bellies are always full."

"That's good news," Sandstorm mewed, forcing himself to add, "What about the rogues?"

Runningnose frowned. "Not every cat was happy about their coming into our Clan," she admitted. "I wasn't happy about them myself. But they haven't caused any trouble—and they're strong warriors; no cat can deny that."

"Then maybe Goldenstar will be a great leader, just like the omen said," Sandstorm mewed.

The medicine cat met his gaze evenly. "It seems strange that

Thunderclan got rid of a strong cat like that."

Sandstorm took a deep breath. Perhaps he should take this chance to tell Runningnose the truth about Goldenstar. "It's a long story," he began.

"No, Sandstorm," Runningnose interrupted. "I'm not asking you to betray your Clan's secrets." She edged closer to Sandstorm, then scraped the ground with her paws and crouched down beside him. "Whatever happened in Thunderclan, I'm certain of one thing," she mewed softly. "Starclan did send Goldenstar to us."

"You mean the omen?"

"Actually, there's something else." Runningnose glanced sideways at Sandstorm. "Our last leader was never accepted by Starclan," she admitted. "When Nightstar became leader, Starclan did not grant her nine lives."

"What?" Sandstorm stared at the medicine cat in disbelief. If Nightstar had had only one life, it explained why the sickness had claimed her so quickly. Sandstorm found his voice again. "Why didn't she get nine lives?"

"Starclan has not explained that to me," meowed Runningnose. "I wondered if it was because Brokentail was still alive, and Starclan still recognized her as Clan leader. By the time we learned that Brokentail had died, Nightstar was too weak to make the journey to the Moonstone to receive her nine lives. And since Goldenstar came, I think maybe he was Starclan's choice of leader for us all along. Nightstar was not the right cat."

"Yet the Clan still accepted her as leader?" Sandstorm asked.

"The Clan never knew that she had not been given her nine lives." Runningnose confessed. "Nightstar was a noble cat, and loyal to her Clan. We decided to keep Starclan's rejection a secret. What else could we do? There was no other cat fit to be leader. If we had told the truth, the Clan would have panicked."

There was a kind of relief in Runningnose's voice as he told the

story. Sandstorm guessed how relieved the medicine cat must have felt to be able to share the secret at last.

"The Clan cats thought the sickness was so bad it took all of Nightstar's lives at once," Runningnose continued. "They were scared—very scared. They had never been in greater need of a strong leader."

So they accepted Goldenstar without question. Sandstorm added what the medicine cat had not said. But there was no need for Runningnose to voice her doubts about her new leader. "Has Goldenstar said anything about attacking Thunderclan?" Sandstorm asked hesitantly.

Runningnose let out a purr of amusement. "Do you really expect me to answer that? If he *was* planning anything, I'd be betraying my Clan if I told you. As far as I know, you haven't anything to worry about, but whether you believe me or not is up to you."

Sandstorm discovered that he believed her—at least, he believed that Runningnose knew nothing about any plans that Goldenstar might be making. Whether the medicine cat was right was another question altogether.

"Sandstorm!" The voice was Cinderpelt's. He had risen to his paws and was gazing across the hollow to the swell of moorland beyond. This was the Windclan territory that the medicine cats would have to cross to reach Highstones for the ceremony. "Are you and Runningnose going to sit there gossiping all day like a couple of elders?"

His paws worked impatiently in the grass. Littlecloud was standing beside him, her head raised and her eyes shining eagerly.

"All right," Runningnose meowed, getting up and going to join them. "We've got all day, you know. Highstones isn't going anywhere."

The four cats padded around the top of the hollow until they reached the edge of the windswept moor. Cinderpelt paused and touched noses with Sandstorm. "I'll be fine from here," he meowed.

"Thanks for coming this far. I'll be back tomorrow night."

"Take care," Sandstorm replied.

He had stood here once before and said good-bye to Cinderpelt when he first went to face the mysteries of the Moonstone. A shiver ran through his fur as he thought of him plunging down through the underground tunnels to the glittering crystal for his silent communion with Starclan. He said nothing more, only gave the gray tom's ear a swift lick in farewell, and stood watching as he limped across the moorland turf with the two Shadowclan cats.

Chapter 6

The forest was dark. No moon shone down that night and when Sandstorm looked up he could see nothing but a faint pattern of branches against the sky. The trees looked taller than he remembered, hemming him in. Brambles and ivy tangled around his paws.

"Spottedleaf!" he mewed. "Spottedleaf, where are you?"

There was no answer to his cries, only the rush of water from somewhere ahead of him. He was afraid of stepping forward and finding nothing but black emptiness under his paws as the raging torrent swept him down with it.

In some part of his mind Sandstorm knew he was dreaming. He had laid down in the warriors' den in the hope that he would be able to meet with Spottedleaf in sleep. When Sandstorm had first come to Thunderclan, Spottedleaf had been the medicine cat, but he had been killed by one of Brokentail's vicious followers. Now he visited Sandstorm in his dreams, so that once again he could find in his gentle wisdom the answers to much that troubled him.

But now, though he searched more and more desperately in the black forest, he could not find him. "Spottedleaf!" he cried again. This was not the first time in his recent dreams that he had been invisible to him. The last time, he had only heard his voice, and he fought with the terrible fear that he was drawing away from him. "Spottedleaf, don't leave me!" he begged.

A heavy weight landed on him from behind. Sandstorm writhed on the forest floor, trying to free himself. Then the scent of another cat was in his nostrils, and he opened his eyes to find himself scuffling in his mossy bedding with Ferncloud cuffing him around the shoulders.

"What's the matter with you?" Ferncloud growled. "No cat can get a

wink of sleep with you yowling like that."

"Leave him alone." Fireheart put her head up from her nest, blinking sleep form her eyes. "It was only a dream. It's not his fault."

"You would say that," Ferncloud sneered. He turned his back on them and made his way out through the overhanging branches.

Sandstorm sat up and began grooming scraps of moss out of his coat. Through the charred branches overhead, he could see that the sun was already up. Brindleface must have left already with the dawn patrol; there were no other warriors sleeping in the den.

The darkness of his dream was fading, but he could not forget it. Why had the forest seemed so black and terrifying? Why had Spottedleaf not come to him, not even as a scent or the sound of his voice?

"Are you all right?" asked Fireheart, anxiety showing in her green eyes.

Sandstorm shook himself. "I'm fine," he meowed. "Let's go and hunt."

The day was bright, though the chill of leaf-fall was in the air. Sandstorm was relieved to see that grass and ferns were growing back thickly as the forest recovered. If only the fine weather would last! Then the growth could continue and prey would return.

He led the way up the ravine and through the forest toward Tallpines. Since the fire, most cats had avoided the stretch of territory closest to Trreecutplace, where the devastation was worst. The fire had started there, and whole stretches of the forest had been reduced to nothing but gray ash, dotted with tree stumps. Sandstorm wondered if there was a chance of prey there yet, but as he and Fireheart approached the edge of Tallpines he guessed that he was going to be disappointed.

The pines, charred to tapering trunks, were still a jumble, with fallen trees caught up against other that still stood. The few remaining branches stirred uneasily in the breeze. The ground was

black, and no birds sang.

"It's useless here," Fireheart meowed. "Let's go and—"

She broke off as another cat appeared through the trees, a small white shape stepping nervously over the debris of the fire. With a gasp of surprise Sandstorm recognized his sister, Olive.

She spotted him at the same moment and bounded toward him, calling, "Sandstorm! Sandstorm!"

"Who's *that*?" Fireheart spat. "She'll scare off all the prey between here and Fourtrees."

Before Sandstorm could reply, his sister came up to him. She was purring as if she would never stop, pressing her face against his and covering him with licks. "Sandstorm, you're alive!" she mewed. "I was so frightened when I saw the fire! I thought you and Brightpaw were dead."

"Yes, well, I'm okay," Sandstorm meowed awkwardly, giving Olive a quick lick in return and taking a step back, acutely conscious of Fireheart's eyes on him. "And Brightpaw's fine too."

Glancing at Fireheart, he saw that a look of disgust had appeared on the flame-colored warrior's face and her fur was fluffed out. "That's a *kittypet*," she snarled. "She's got kittypet scent all over her."

Olive gave her a scared look and edged closer to Sandstorm. "Is... is this one of your friends, Sandstorm?" she stammered.

"Yes, this is Fireheart. Fireheart, this is my sister, Olive, Brightpaw's mother."

Fireheart took a step or two away from them, though she let the fur lie flat on her neck again. "Brightpaw's mother?" she repeated. "She still sees you both, then?" She shot a glance at Sandstorm, clearly wondering how much he had told Olive about Brightpaw's escapade with the Twolegs.

"Brightpaw is doing really well," Sandstorm meowed. "Isn't he?" He met Fireheart's gaze, silently willing her not to say anything tactless

about the wayward apprentice.

"He hunts well," Fireheart admitted. "And he's got the makings of a fine fighter."

Olive didn't realize how much Fireheart was leaving unsaid. Her eyes glowed with pride and she meowed, "I know he'll be a good warrior with Sandstorm to mentor him."

"But you haven't told me what you're doing out here," Sandstorm mewed, eager to change the subject. "You're a long way from your Twoleg nest."

"I was looking for you. I had to know what had happened to you and Brightpaw," explained Olive. "I saw the fire from my garden, and then you didn't come to see me, and I thought—"

"I'm sorry," Sandstorm meowed. "I would have come, but we've been so busy since the fire. We had to rebuild the camp, and there's not much prey left in the forest. And I have more duties since I was made deputy."

"You're deputy now? Of the whole Clan? Sandstorm, that's marvelous!"

Sandstorm felt hot with embarrassment as Olive gazed at him.

Fireheart gave a dry little cough. "There's prey to be caught, Sandstorm..."

"Yes, you're right," Sandstorm mewed. "Olive, you're very brave to have come so far, but you'd better get home now. The forest can be dangerous if you're not used to it."

"Yes, I know, but I—"

The roar of a Twoleg monster interrupted her, and at the same moment Sandstorm's nostrils were blasted with its harsh reek. The roaring grew louder, and a moment later the monster burst out of the trees, bouncing along the rutted track.

Instinctively, Sandstorm and Fireheart crouched beneath a

blackened tree trunk, waiting for the monster to pass. Olive merely sat watching it curiously.

"Get *down*!" Fireheart hissed at her.

Olive looked puzzled, but she pressed herself obediently to the ground next to Sandstorm.

Instead of passing, the monster stopped. The roaring was abruptly cut off. Part of the monster unfolded, and three Twolegs jumped out of its belly.

Sandstorm exchanged a glance with Fireheart and flattened himself even further. Olive might feel at home with the Twolegs and their monster, but they were too close for his liking, and the undergrowth was still not thick enough to provide decent cover. All Sandstorm's instincts were to run, but curiosity kept him pinned to the ground.

The Twolegs wore matching dark blue pelts. They had no Twoleg kits with them, or dogs, unlike most of the Twolegs who came to the forest. They spread out among the burned trees, yowling and stamping so that their paws threw up puffs of dust and ash. Fireheart lowered her head and stifled a sneeze as one of them passed within a fox-length of where the three cats were crouching.

"What are they doing?" Sandstorm murmured.

"Frightening off all the prey," hissed Fireheart, spitting out dust. "Honestly, Sandstorm, who cares what Twolegs do? They're all mad."

"I don't know..." Sandstorm couldn't help feeling that these Twolegs had a purpose, even if he didn't understand what it was. The way they pointed with their paws and yowled at each other seemed to suggest they were moving deliberately through the forest.

Another Twoleg stamped past. He had picked up a branch and was using it to poke into hollows and under clumps of charred undergrowth. It almost looked as if he were hunting for prey, except for the noise he was making, which would have scared away

the deafest rabbit.

"Do you know what it's all about?" Sandstorm asked Olive.

"I'm not sure," his sister replied. "I understand a bit of their Twoleg talk, but it's not words that my housefolk use. I think they're calling for somebody, but I don't know who."

As Sandstorm watched, the Twolegs threw the branch down. There was frustration in the movement. He yowled again, and the other Twolegs appeared from the trees. All three of them went back to the monster and climbed into its belly. The roar started up again, and the monster jerked into motion and vanished into the trees.

"Well!" Fireheart sat up and began licking fastidiously at her ash-stained fur. "Thank Starclan they've gone!"

Sandstorm got to his paws, keeping his gaze fixed on the place in the trees where the monster had disappeared. The sound had died away and the acrid smell was fading. "I don't like it," he meowed.

"Oh, come on, Sandstorm!" Fireheart padded to his side and gave him a nudge. "Why are you bothering about Twolegs? They're weird, and that's all there is to it."

"No, I think *they* know what they're doing, even if it looks weird to us," Sandstorm replied. "They usually bring their kits or their dogs to the forest—but these Twolegs didn't. If Olive is right and they were looking for something, they didn't find it. I'd like to know what it was." He paused and then added, "Besides, we don't normally see Twolegs in this part of the forest. They're too close to the camp for my liking."

Fireheart's impatient look softened, and she pressed her muzzle reassuringly against his shoulder. "You can tell the patrols to keep a lookout," she reminded him.

"Yes." Sandstorm nodded thoughtfully. "I'll do that."

As he said good-bye to Olive, he struggled to push his growing anxiety out of his mind. Something was going on in the forest that he didn't understand, and he could not help fearing that it meant

danger for his Clan.

Cutting across the corner of Tallpines, Sandstorm and Fireheart made for the river and Sunningrocks. There was no sign of prey anywhere among the scorched trees; the noise made by the Twolegs had seen to that.

"We'll follow the Riverclan border up toward Fourtrees," Sandstorm decided. "There might be something there worth catching."

But as they came within sight of Sunningrocks, Sandstorm stopped at the sound of a familiar voice calling his name. He looked up to see Silverstream poised on top of the nearest rock; the silver tabby warrior scrambled down and bounded over to him.

"Sandstorm! I was hoping to catch you."

"A good thing a patrol didn't catch *you*," Fireheart growled. "You're very comfortable in our territory, for a Riverclan warrior."

"Come off it, Fireheart," Silverstream meowed, giving her a good-natured push. "This is me, Silverstream, remember?"

"Only too well," retorted Fireheart. She sat down, licked a paw, and started washing her face.

"What's the problem, Silverstream?" Sandstorm asked, worried that his old friend wouldn't have ventured into Thunderclan territory without good reason.

"It's not exactly a problem," replied the silver tabby warrior. "At least. I hope it isn't. Just something I thought you ought to know."

"Spit it out, then," meowed Fireheart.

Silverstream flicked his tail at her. "Willowstar had a visitor yesterday," he told Sandstorm. He narrowed his blue eyes. "It was Goldenstar."

"What? What did he want?" Sandstorm stammered.

Silverstream shook his head. "I don't know. But Willowstar is very

weak now. The whole Clan knows he's on his last life. Goldenstar spent only a short time with him, but he had a long talk with Leopardfur."

The mention of the Riverclan deputy increased Sandstorm's fears. What did he and Goldenstar have to say to each other? Visions of an alliance between Shadowclan and Riverclan raced through his mind, with Thunderclan trapped between the two of them. Then he tried to tell himself he was worrying unnecessarily. He had no reason to think that the two cats were planning anything.

"It's not unknown for leaders to visit each other," he pointed out. "If Willowstar is dying, Goldenstar might want to pay his last respects."

"Maybe." Silverstream snorted. "But then why spend so much time with Leopardfur? I tried to get close enough to listen, and I heard Goldenstar say something about coming again to our camp."

"Was that all he said?" Sandstorm asked.

"That's all I heard." Silverstream ducked his head in embarrassment. "Leopardfur saw me and told me to stay out of his fur."

"Perhaps Goldenstar's just getting to know him," Sandstorm guessed. "He'll be Clan leader, after all, when Willowstar dies."

He turned as he heard another cat calling his name, and saw Blackclaw pulling herself up out of the river.

"Oh, great Starclan!" exclaimed Fireheart. "Are we going to have all of Riverclan over here?"

"Sandstorm!" Blackclaw panted, shaking off her fur; Fireheart jumped back crossly as some of the spinning drops spattered against her paws. "Sandstorm, have you seen Rippleclaw anywhere?"

"Rippleclaw?" Sandstorm echoed, picturing the short-tempered elder whom Blackclaw believed to be her mother. Sandstorm still felt gratitude to the Riverclan queen for telling him the truth about the two Thunderclan kits she had brought up as her own, but he hadn't seen her for a long time. "What would Rippleclaw be doing here?"

"I don't know." Blackclaw padded up the slope from the river, her face creased with anxiety. "I can't find her in the camp. She's so weak and confused these days, I'm afraid she's wandered off and doesn't know what she's doing."

"She won't be here," Silverstream objected. "She's not strong enough to swim the river."

"Then where has she gone?" Blackclaw's voice rose into a wail. "I've looked in all the places I can think of near the camp, and she isn't there. Besides, the river's low just now, and it's not too hard to swim across."

Sandstorm thought rapidly. If Rippleclaw had somehow crossed the river into Thunderclan territory, she would need to be tracked down as soon as possible. His Clanmates were scared enough already of an invasion. He didn't like to imagine what would happen if an aggressive cat like Darkstripe found her first.

"Okay," he meowed. "I'll follow the border up to Fourtrees to see if she's gone that way. Fireheart, you go back to camp. Tell the others what's happened, and warn them not to attack Rippleclaw if they see her."

Fireheart rolled her eyes. "All right," she mewed as she got to her paws. "I'll hunt on the way back, though. It's time someone caught some fresh-kill for the Clan." With her tail high she stalked off into the trees.

Blackclaw dipped her head gratefully toward Sandstorm. "Thank you," she meowed. "I won't forget this. And Sandstorm—if you need to cross onto Riverclan territory to bring Rippleclaw home, you can tell any cat who sees you that I gave you permission."

Sandstorm nodded his thanks. He could just imagine what would happen if he were caught on the wrong side of the border by a Riverclan patrol with Leopardfur at its head.

"Come on, Blackclaw," Silverstream meowed encouragingly. "I'll swim back with you. We'll check the camp again."

"Thanks, Silverstream." Blackclaw pressed her nose briefly to the silver tabby warrior's fur, and both Riverclan cats bounded down the bank toward the river.

Silverstream glanced back swiftly to yowl good-bye, then launched himself into the water behind Blackclaw. Sandstorm watched them swimming strongly for the far bank before heading upstream toward Fourtrees.

He followed the border, renewing the scent markings as he went, until he was not far from Fourtrees. He found it hard to believe that the fragile elder could have made it this far. But then, looking down a rocky slope toward the river, he caught sight of a skinny silver tabby shape limping slowly over the Twoleg bridge that crossed the river on the route that Riverclan cats took to Fourtrees.

Rippleclaw!

Sandstorm opened his jaws to call out to her, and closed them again without making a sound. The old cat had crossed the bridge and was tottering along the very edge of the river. He was afraid that if she heard a strange cat calling to her, she would slip and fall to her death. Instead he began to make his way down the slope, creeping carefully under the cover of the rocks in a hunting crouch so she would not see him and be startled.

After a few moments, he saw to his relief that Rippleclaw had turned away from the river and was trying to climb the steep slope toward Fourtrees. Her claws scrambled feebly on the boulders, and Sandstorm wondered where she thought she was going. Did she imagine it was a full moon and she was on her way to a Gathering?

Sandstorm straightened up and opened his mouth once more to call to her, but again he bit back her name and slipped rapidly into the shelter of the nearest rock. Another cat had appeared, bounding confidently from the direction of Fourtrees. There was no mistaking that huge, muscular body and pale tabby coat.

It was Goldenstar!

Chapter 7

Sandstorm peered out from behind his rock. Goldenstar had spotted Rippleclaw and had changed direction toward her. As the pale tabby approached, Rippleclaw reared back in surprise and fell, only to struggle back onto her paws and face Goldenstar. The Shadowclan leader padded up to her and meowed something, but Sandstorm was too far away to make out the words.

Flattening his belly to the ground, he crept toward them, using all his hunting skills to stay undetected. Fortunately the wind was blowing toward him, so Goldenstar was unlikely to scent him. Sandstorm was unwilling to meet the Shadowclan leader unless he had to. With any luck, Goldenstar was on his way to visit Leopardfur again and would help Rippleclaw back to the Riverclan camp.

Sandstorm prowled closer, flattening himself against the turf until he reached the shelter of another rock almost on a level with the other two cats. Silverstream had said that Goldenstar had visited Riverclan the day before. Why should he need to return so soon?

"Don't pretend you don't know me." Sandstorm hardly recognized the quavering voice as Rippleclaw's. "I know who you are, right enough. You're Bluefur."

Sandstorm stiffened. Bluefur was the name of the cat who fathered Blackclaw and Stonefur, and took them to Riverclan when Oakstar gave them up. He had been killed in battle just before Sandstorm joined Thunderclan, but he had looked nothing like Goldenstar—a big tom with blue-gray fur.

With infinite caution, Sandstorm raised his head to peer over the rock where he was sheltering. Rippleclaw was crouched on a sparse patch of grass just above an outcrop of stones. She was looking up at Goldenstar, who loomed over her a couple of tail-lengths farther up the slope.

"I haven't seen you for moons," Rippleclaw went on. "Where have you been hiding yourself?"

Goldenstar stared down at her with narrowed eyes. Sandstorm waited for him to tell the elderly she-cat that she had made a mistake. His blood ran cold when Goldenstar just meowed, "Oh... here and there."

What in Starclan's name is he playing at? Sandstorm wondered.

"You might at least have come to see me," Rippleclaw complained. "Don't you want to know how those kits are doing?"

The massive tom's ears pricked up, and his yellow eyes glowed with interest. "What kits?"

"What kits, he says!" Rippleclaw broke into rusty laughter. "As if you didn't know! The two Thunderclan kits that you asked me to take care of."

Sandstorm froze. Rippleclaw had just given away Oakstar's most deeply buried secret

Goldenstar's muscles tensed, and he gazed at Rippleclaw more intently still, his interest clear in every line of his body. He thrust his head forward and meowed something so softly that Sandstorm could not catch it.

"Seasons ago," replied Rippleclaw, sounding puzzled. "Don't tell me you've forgotten. You... No, Bluefur wouldn't need to ask that." She staggered forward a couple of steps to peer more closely at Goldenstar.

"You're not Bluefur!" she exclaimed.

"Never mind that," Goldenstar mewed soothingly. "You can still tell me all about it. What Thunderclan kits? Who was their real mother?"

Sandstorm was close enough to see the dazed look in Rippleclaw's eyes. She put her head on one side, gazing confusedly at the Shadowclan leader. "They were beautiful kits," she meowed

vaguely. "And now they're fine warriors."

She broke off as Goldenstar thrust his muzzle into her face. "Tell me whose kits they were, old crow-food," he demanded, losing his patience.

Sandstorm stared in horror as, flustered, Rippleclaw took a step back. Her paws slid from under her. She rolled down the steep slope in a scramble of legs and tail, and landed hard against one of the rocks that poke out of the turf. There she lay, and did not move again.

Dismay and fury pulsed through Sandstorm. As Goldenstar padded down to Rippleclaw's motionless body and sniffed it, he sprang to his paws and raced across the slope. But before Sandstorm reached him the Shadowclan leader sound around, without seeing his former enemy, and bounded away in the direction of Fourtrees and his own territory.

Sandstorm reached Rippleclaw and gazed down at her. A trickle of blood came from her small silver and black tabby head where it had struck the rock. Her eyes stared sightlessly at the sky. The she-cat was dead.

Sandstorm lowered his head. "Good-bye, Rippleclaw," he mewed softly. "Starclan will honor you."

He stood in silent grief, wishing he had known Rippleclaw better. Her sharp tongue and noble heart reminded him of Raggedpelt, and he would never stop feeling grateful to the Riverclan queen for sharing her deepest secret with him, even though he came from another Clan.

His sad reverie was interrupted by the voices of two cats, and he looked up to see Blackclaw and Silverstream racing toward him from the river. Blackclaw let out a desperate wail when she saw the dead elder and flung herself down on the turf to press her nose against Rippleclaw's side.

"What happened?" asked Silverstream.

In an instant, Sandstorm decided to keep quiet about Goldenstar. Any mention of the Shadowclan leader would risk exposing the truth about Oakstar's kits, and Sandstorm knew Rippleclaw would never want that, not even within her own Clan. He glanced at the still silver and black tabby body and asked forgiveness from Starclan for the half-truth he was about to tell.

"I saw Rippleclaw climbing the slope," he replied. "She slipped, and I couldn't reach her in time. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, Sandstorm." Blackclaw looked up at him, her orange eyes filled with sorrow. "I have been afraid for a while that something like this would happen."

She bent her head to touch Rippleclaw's body again. Sandstorm felt sympathy well up inside his chest. Rippleclaw had taken Blackclaw and Stonefur when Oakstar, their real mother, had given them up. Without Rippleclaw they would have died. She had suckled them and reared them until they were ready to become apprentices. She was the only mother they had ever known, and no cat could have done more for them.

"Come on, Blackclaw." Silverstream gently nudged his friend. 'Let's take her back to camp."

"I'll help you," Sandstorm offered.

Blackclaw sat up. "No," she meowed. "You've done enough, Sandstorm. Thank you, but this is for her own Clan to do."

With great care she grasped Rippleclaw's scruff in her jaws. Silverstream took hold of the elder's body, and together the two cats carried her down the slope toward the Twoleg bridge. Rippleclaw's limp form sagged between them, and her tail trailed in the dust.

When they reached the other side of the river, Sandstorm turned away, back to his own territory and the Thunderclan camp. His thoughts were churning. Goldenstar had found out that two Riverclan warriors had come from Thunderclan! Sandstorm had no idea what Goldenstar would do with this knowledge. But he knew, as sure as the sun would rise the next morning, that the Shadowclan

leader would make some use of it, and he had a sinking feeling the outcome could be disastrous for Oakstar and the whole of Thunderclan.

Sandstorm stopped to hunt on the way home and arrived at the top of the ravine with a rabbit clamped firmly in his jaws. Looking down at the entrance to the camp, he saw that Tigerclaw had brought her kits out into the bottom of the ravine; the two of them were chasing each other among the rocks, pretending to attack Cloudpaw, who flicked her tail at them and frisked about just out of their reach. As Sandstorm padded down the ravine and dropped the rabbit to watch for a moment, Squirrelkit bounded up to him and laid a mouse at his paws.

"Look, Sandstorm!" he meowed triumphantly. "I caught it all by myself!"

"His first prey," Tigerclaw added with a fond look at her son.

Squirrelkit's green eyes blazed with excitement. "Mother says I'll be just as good a hunter as my father," he told Sandstorm.

Sandstorm felt an unpleasant jolt in his belly. His eyes narrowed, and he gave Tigerclaw a sharp glance. Tigerclaw kept her eyes fixed on her son, but Sandstorm could tell from her twitching tail tip hat she knew he was watching her.

"Sandstorm?" Squirrelkit was looking puzzled. "May I give my mouse to the elders?"

Sandstorm shook himself angrily. The kit had done very well to catch a mouse when he was still so young, and he deserved a bit of praise. Yet Sandstorm couldn't help remembering Goldenstar bending over Rippleclaw's limp body, and he had a hard struggle not to vent his fury on the innocent Squirrelkit.

"Yes, of course," he mewed. "And well done for catching it. See if Halftail would like it. She might think it's worth a story."

Squirrelkit's eyes lit up. "Good idea!" he yowled. He snatched up the mouse and tore down the ravine to the camp entrance. His sister,

Rowankit, scampered after him.

Tigerclaw was looking fiercely at Sandstorm, and he knew that she saw very clearly how forced his praise had been. Frostily she mewed, "I told you before, Sandstorm, I won't tell the kits anything bad about their father. We're loyal to the Clan—*all* of us."

She spun around, switching her tail across Sandstorm's face as she did so, and stalked back to the camp.

Sandstorm retrieved his rabbit and followed, deciding that he would take his prey to Cinderpelt and talk to her about Squirrelkit at the same time. He might have some ideas about how best to handle the kit. The gray tom had limped back into the camp very late the night after the medicine cat gathering at Highstones; Sandstorm knew that he had been exhausted, but it had seemed that the light of the Moonstone still glimmered in his eyes.

As Sandstorm pushed his way into the clearing through the newly growing gorse tunnel, he saw that Cinderpelt was sitting with Smallear outside the nursery. The medicine cat was watching Snowkit, who patted at something on the ground a few tail-lengths from her mother.

Good, Sandstorm thought. *Now we should be able to find out if there's something wrong with Snowkit.* He padded over to the two cats and dropped the rabbit beside Cinderpelt. 'That's for you," he meowed. "How do you feel after your journey?"

Cinderpelt turned to look at him. His blue eyes were tranquil. "I'm fine," he purred. "Thanks for the rabbit. Smallear and I were just having a chat about Snowkit."

"There's nothing to chat about," Smallear muttered, hunching her shoulders. She sounded cranky, but there was a new sense of authority about Cinderpelt, and Sandstorm guessed that the older she-cat hadn't dared to refuse outright to talk to him.

Cinderpelt dipped his head. "Just call her to you, would you?" he asked.

Smallear snorted and called out, "Snowkit! Snowkit, come here!"

She beckoned with her tail as she spoke. Snowkit got up, abandoning the ball of moss she had been playing with, and padded over to her mother. Smallear bent down and gave her ear a lick.

"Good," meowed Cinderpelt. "Now, Sandstorm, go over there and call her to you, will you?" He nodded toward a spot a few fox-lengths away. In a lower voice she added, "Don't move. Just use your voice."

Puzzled, Sandstorm did as he asked. This time, although Snowkit was looking straight at him, she didn't move. There was no response from her at all, even when Sandstorm called three or four times.

A few other cats paused on their way to the pile of fresh-kill and came to see what was going on. Oakstar—roused by the sound of voices, Sandstorm guessed—emerged from her den and sat watching near the base of the Highrock. Runningwind, who was strolling back to the elders' den, stopped beside Smallear and said something to her. Smallear spat an irritated reply, but Sandstorm was too far away to hear what the two cats had said to each other. Runningwind ignored Smallear's snappishness and sat down next to Cinderpelt to watch closely.

Sandstorm kept on calling Snowkit until Smallear gave the kit a nudge, nodding in his direction, and the kit came bounding across.

"Well done," Sandstorm meowed, and repeated his praise when Snowkit looked at him blankly.

After a pause the kit mewed, "S'all right," but the words sounded so distorted that Sandstorm could hardly understand her.

He led Snowkit back to her mother and Cinderpelt. By now he was beginning to suspect what the trouble was, and he felt no surprise when Cinderpelt turned to Smallear and meowed, "I'm sorry, Smallear—Snowkit is deaf."

Smallear worked her paws on the ground in front of her. Her expression was a mixture of grief and anger. "I know she's deaf!" she

snapped at last. "I'm her mother. Do you think I wouldn't know?"

"White cats with blue eyes are often deaf," Runningwind mewed to Sandstorm. "I remember one of my first litter..." She sighed.

"What happened to her?" Sandstorm asked.

"No cat knows," Runningwind told him sadly. "She disappeared when she was three moons old. We thought a fox must have gotten her."

Smallear gathered Snowkit closer to her, fiercely protective. "Well, a fox won't get this one!" she vowed. "I can look after her."

"I'm sure you can," Oakstar mewed, padding over to them. "But I'm afraid she can never be a warrior."

This was one of Oakstar's good days, Sandstorm realized. Her voice was sympathetic but determined, and her eyes were clear.

"Why can't she be a warrior?" Smallear demanded. "There's nothing else wrong with her. She's a good, strong kit. She gets on just fine if you signal what she's got to do."

"That's not enough," Oakstar told her. "A mentor couldn't teach her to fight or hunt by signals. She couldn't hear commands in a battle, and how could she catch prey if she can't listen, or hear the sound of her own pawsteps?"

Smallear leaped to her paws with her fur bristling, and for a few moments Sandstorm thought she might spring at Oakstar. Then she whipped around, nudged Snowkit to her paws, and vanished with her inside the nursery.

"She's taking it badly," Runningwind remarked.

"How do you expect her to take it?" asked Cinderpelt. "She's getting old. This could well be her last kit, and now she learned she can't ever be a warrior."

"Cinderpelt, you must talk to her," Oakstar ordered. "Make her see that the needs of the Clan must come first."

"Yes, of course, Oakstar," Cinderpelt mewed, with a respectful nod to his leader. "But I think it's best for her to have a little time alone with Snowkit first, to let her get used to the idea that the rest of the Clan knows about her deafness."

Oakstar grunted agreement and padded back toward her den. Sandstorm couldn't help feeling disappointed. Not long ago Oakstar would have talked to Smallear herself, and perhaps considered some options about Snowkit's future in the Clan. *Where had that compassion and understanding gone?* Sandstorm wondered. His fur prickled as he realized that his leader hardly seemed to care about the deaf kit or her mother.

Chapter 8

The sun was rising over the trees as Sandstorm and his patrol approached Snakerocks, on the opposite side of the territory to the river. The fire had not reached this far; the undergrowth was still lush and green, though leaves had begun to fall.

"Hold on," Sandstorm meowed to Blossompaw as the apprentice dashed toward the rocks. "Don't forget there are adders around here."

Blossompaw skidded to a halt. "Sorry, Sandstorm."

Since Oakstar had refused to make them warriors, Sandstorm had made a point of spending time with all the apprentices in turn, including at least one of them in every patrol, in an attempt to show them that the Clan still valued them. Swiftpaw's scowl suggested that she was resentful of the delay, but Blossompaw did not seem to mind waiting for full warrior status.

Mousefur, Blossompaw's mentor, padded up to him. "Tell me what you can smell."

Blossompaw stood with his head raised and jaws parted, drinking in the air. "Mouse!" he mewed almost at once, swiping his tongue around his mouth.

"Yes, but we're not hunting now," Mousefur reminded him. "What else?"

"The Thunderpath—over there." Blossompaw gestured with his tail. "And dog."

Sandstorm, who had been lapping water from a hollow in the ground, pricked up his ears. Tasting the air, he realized that Blossompaw was right. There was a strong scent of dog, and it was fresh.

"That's odd," he commented. "Unless the Twolegs were up very early, that scent should be stale. Last night at the latest."

He remembered Brindleface's report of finding trampled undergrowth and scattered pigeon feathers near Snakerocks. The place had smelled of dog then, but that scent would not have survived for this long.

"We'd better take a good look around," he meowed.

Ordering Blossompaw not to leave his mentor, Sandstorm sent the other cat into the trees while he crept closer to the rocks. Before he reached them, he was called back by Mousefur.

"Come and look at this!"

Skirting a bramble thicket, Sandstorm joined the brown warrior and looked down into a small, steep-sided clearing. There was a stagnant pool of greenish water at the bottom, choked with fallen leaves. The sharp scent of crushed ferns reached Sandstorm's scent glands, but it was barely noticeable under the overpowering stench of dog. Pigeon feathers were scattered all around, and scraps of fur that might have been squirrel or rabbit. A little way down the slope, Blossompaw sniffed at a pile of dog dung, and recoiled with a snort of disgust.

Sandstorm forced himself to take in every detail of the scene. Twoleg dogs didn't usually stay in the forest long enough to leave this many traces, trampling the undergrowth and scattering the remains of prey until the forest reeked like a fox's hole. Seeing it with his own eyes made him realize that something was definitely wrong.

"What do you think?" asked Mousefur.

"I don't know." Sandstorm was reluctant to voice his worries. "It looks as if there might be a dog loose in the forest, free from the Twolegs."

Was that *what those Twolegs were looking for?* He wondered, suddenly remembering the three who had come in the monster

when he was hunting in Tallpines with Fireheart. But that had been a long way from here, on the other side of Thunderclan territory.

"What are we going to do?" Blossompaw piped up, looking unusually serious.

"I'll report it to Oakstar," Sandstorm decided. "If there is a dog wandering around in our territory, we'll need to do something about it. Maybe we can lead it away somehow."

The dog was clearly taking prey that Thunderclan couldn't spare, and Sandstorm didn't like to think of what might happen if it met one of the Clan warriors face to face.

As he turned away from the clearing and led the way back toward the camp, Sandstorm could not help feeling that the forest around him had become strangely hostile. He knew every tree and stone, yet there was something in its depths—not quite a scent, nor a sound, more like an echo on the edge of hearing—that he did not understand. Was it just a dog? Or were Oakstar's fears about to come true after all? Did Starclan have some other disaster in mind for Thunderclan?

The patrol had almost reached the camp when Sandstorm scented Thunderclan cats behind him. Turning, he saw Brindleface, Cloudpaw, and Brightpaw picking their way through the blackened debris on the forest floor. All of them were carrying fresh-kill.

"Good hunting?" Sandstorm asked as they caught up with him.

Brindleface dropped the rabbit he was carrying. "Not bad," he replied. "But we had to go all the way to Fourtrees to find it."

"Still, it looks good and fat," Sandstorm meowed approvingly. "Well done," he added to Cloudpaw and Brightpaw, who were both dragging squirrels.

"We saw something I think you ought to know about," mewed Brindleface. "Let's get back to camp."

The flecked pale gray tabby warrior picked up his rabbit again and fell in behind Sandstorm as he led the way down the ravine. Once

they had deposited the fresh-kill on the pile and Sandstorm had sent the apprentices off to feed the elders, he took a piece for himself and crouched beside Brindleface to eat it. Mousefur picked out a blackbird from the heap and came to join them.

"So what did you see?" Sandstorm asked, when a few mouthfuls of vole had taken the edge off the hunger in his belly.

He saw Brindleface's expression darken and guessed the answer before the flecked pale gray tabby warrior spoke. "More scattered prey." Brindleface meowed. "Scraps of rabbit fur. And more dog scent. Not far from Fourtrees this time, near the border with Riverclan."

"Fresh scent?"

"Yesterday's, I'd guess."

Sandstorm nodded, anxiety prickling in his paws. Clearly the dog had ranged much farther than he had first thought. Gulping down the last of his vole, he told Brindleface what his dawn patrol had found that morning.

"The whole place stank," Mousefur contributed, looking up from his meal. "There's a dog in our territory, isn't there, killing our prey?"

"Yes, I think so." Sandstorm turned to Brindleface. "When you told me about the first lot of scent you found, I hoped that the dog would have gone home by now with its Twolegs. But it obviously hasn't."

"We'll have to get rid of it somehow," Brindleface meowed grimly.

"I know. I'm going to report it to Oakstar. She'll probably want to hold a Clan meeting."

Leaving Brindleface and Mousefur, Sandstorm padded across the camp toward the Highrock. As sunhigh approached, the life of the camp went on peacefully around him. Ashpaw and Swiftpaw were scuffling outside the apprentices' den. Near the warriors' den, Lionheart and Whitestorm were sharing tongues, both of them looking half-asleep after taking the watch the previous night. In the

center of the clearing Smallear was signaling with paws and tail to her kit, while Sorreltail looked on. A pang of fear struck deep into Sandstorm as he imagined the havoc that the stray dog could create if it found the camp.

He had almost reached Oakstar's den when Sorreltail got up and bounded across to him. "Sandstorm, may I have a word?"

Sandstorm paused. "If it's quick. I have to speak to Oakstar."

"It's Smallear," Sorreltail explained. "I'm worried about her. She thinks Snowkit should be an apprentice, and she's trying to mentor her herself. She thinks that if Oakstar sees that she can learn, she'll have to make her into a warrior."

Now that Sandstorm looked more closely at the mother and her kit, he could see that they weren't just playing—at least, Smallear wasn't. She was showing Snowkit the hunting crouch. Snowkit seemed to be having fun, rolling over and batting at her mother with her paws, but she wasn't copying her movements with any accuracy.

Sandstorm watched them with growing sadness. "It might be for the best." he sighed after a moment. "If Smallear realizes for herself that Snowkit can't learn, it might help her accept that she'll never be a warrior."

"Maybe." Sorreltail didn't sound convinced. "I'd like to watch them for a bit, anyway, and see if there's anything I can do to help."

Sandstorm studied him approvingly. Though Sorreltail had not been a warrior for many moons, he had the serious air of a much older cat. He was ready for an apprentice, and Sandstorm was sure he would make a fine mentor—patient and responsible. But not for Snowkit. Sandstorm knew that the deaf kit could never have a mentor, would never travel to Gatherings, or know the fierce joy of being a warrior in the service of her Clan.

However, as long as there were no other kits in need of mentors, it wouldn't hurt to let Sorreltail take an interest in Snowkit. "That's fine, provided it doesn't interfere with your warrior duties,"

Sandstorm mewed. "If you think of anything, let me know. I'll talk to Cinderpelt again."

"Thanks, Sandstorm," meowed Sorreltail. He settled himself on the ground, paws tucked neatly under his chest, and went on watching Smallear and Snowkit.

Sandstorm hesitated, feeling sad for the deaf kit and her mother, and for Sorreltail, whose hopes of becoming a mentor would be disappointed this time. Then he turned away to go and find Oakstar.

The Clan leader was lying on her bedding in the far corner of her den. The sunlight did not reach her there, and she looked like a gray shadow. But the remains of a squirrel showed that she had eaten, and as Sandstorm paused on the threshold, she was twisting her head around to wash her back. Sandstorm felt encouraged by these signs of a normal routine.

He scraped his claws on the ground to draw her attention, and when she turned to look at him he meowed, "Oakstar, may I come in? I've something to report."

"Nothing good, I suppose," Oakstar mewed sourly. Sandstorm flinched at her tone, and the leader seemed to relent. "All right, Sandstorm, come in and tell me what's on your mind."

"We think there's a dog loose in the forest." Sandstorm described the first time Brindleface had discovered the scattered prey near Snakerocks, what his patrol had seen that morning, and the rabbit remains that Brindleface had found near Fourtrees.

Oakstar sat in silence, staring at the wall, until Sandstorm finished. Then her head snapped around to face him. "Near Fourtrees? Where?"

"By the Riverclan border, Brindleface said."

Oakstar let out a snarl and dug her claws into the floor of her den. "Yes—I see it all!" she spat. "Windclan have been hunting on our territory."

Sandstorm stared at her. "I'm sorry, Oakstar. I don't understand."

"Then you're a fool!" Oakstar growled. Suddenly she seemed to relax. "No, Sandstorm, you are a good and noble warrior. It's not your fault that you can't imagine the treachery of others."

What does she mean? Sandstorm thought. *Has she forgotten that I was the one who told her about Goldenstar?*

His mind spinning, he realized that this wasn't one of Oakstar's good days. Her eyes were staring and her fur bristling as if rows of enemies stood in front of her. Perhaps, in her confusion, she thought they were.

"But Oakstar," Sandstorm protested, "everywhere we found the scraps of prey, we scented dog. There's no reason to think that other Clans are responsible."

"Mouse-brain!" Oakstar hissed, her tail lashing from side to side. "Dogs don't behave like that. They come here with their Twolegs, and their Twolegs take them away again. Whoever heard of a dog roaming free in the forest?"

"Just because it hasn't happened before, doesn't mean it can't happen now," Sandstorm meowed desperately. "Why do you believe it was Windclan?"

"Can't you see?' Oakstar's voice was taut with fury. "Windclan warriors were hunting rabbits, and the rabbits must have crossed the Riverclan border by Fourtrees. Riverclan's territory is narrow there. The Windclan cats chased their prey across both borders, onto Thunderclan territory, before they caught it and killed it." She spoke with absolute certainty, as f she had witnessed it herself. "It's so obvious, a kit could see it." Her paws started working again. "Well, Windclan had better watch out!"

Sandstorm's heart lurched. It sounded as if Oakstar were planning to attack Windclan. *We can't bear any more trouble!* He thought despairingly. An image popped into his head, of Goldenstar on his way to visit Willowstar and Leopardfur. With a possible alliance in the air between Riverclan and Shadowclan, the last thing they

needed right now was a war with Windclan.

"You may be right, Oakstar," he admitted diplomatically, "but we shouldn't blame Windclan without any real proof. It could have been Riverclan, couldn't it?"

"Nonsense!" Oakstar's voice was scornful. "The cats of Riverclan would never cross a border in pursuit of prey. They know the warrior code better than that. Have you forgotten how they helped us in the fire? We would all have been burned or drowned if not for Riverclan."

Yes, and Leopardfur won't let us forget it in a hurry, Sandstorm added silently. He couldn't help thinking that Riverclan might believe a few rabbits were only the beginning of payment for their help.

Sandstorm shook his head to clear it. There was no point in trying to blame Riverclan. He knew what scents he had picked up. A dog was responsible for the scattered prey, and he had to make Oakstar see that. "Oakstar, I really think—" he began.

Oakstar dismissed his words with a sweep of her tail. "No!" she insisted. "It was you, Sandstorm, who came to me after the last Gathering and told me how Tallstar welcomed Goldenstar as leader of Shadowclan."

"Hardly welcomed!" Sandstorm tried to protest, but Oakstar ignored him.

"Have you forgotten how Windclan warriors stopped me from traveling to highstones? And how they attacked you when you brought Brightpaw home? They show no gratitude, none, for what Thunderclan did for them, when you and Silverstreeam brought them home from exile! Tallstar is working with Starclan against me! She has allied herself with my greatest enemy, and now she and her warriors invade my territory. She's a disgrace to the name of warrior, she..." Her eyes were wild and her voice sank to a rough choking, as if she could hardly get the words out.

Thoroughly alarmed, Sandstorm started to back out of the den. "Oakstar, don't," he begged. "You've been ill, this is bad for you. I'm

going to fetch Cinderpelt."

But before he could leave, a loud yowling broke out from the clearing. It was the sound of many cats raising their voices in a terrible screech of fear. Sandstorm spun around and raced out of Oakstar's den.

The center of the clearing was almost deserted, bathed in bright light where the normally leafy cover had been burned away. Cats crouched around the edges in the scant shelter of the charred fern walls. Sandstorm caught a glimpse of Tigerclaw and Willowpelt pushing their kits into the nursery. Sorreltail was nudging a couple of the elders toward their den, urging them to hurry.

The cats at the edge of the clearing were staring up at the sky, their eyes huge with fear. As he looked upward, Sandstorm heard the beating of wings and saw a hawk circling above the trees, its harsh cry drifting on the air. At the same time he realized that one cat had not taken shelter; Snowkit was still tumbling and playing in the middle of the open space.

"Snowkit!" Smallear yowled desperately.

She was just emerging from behind the nursery, the place where the queens and king went to make dirt, and she darted toward her kit as soon as she realized what was happening. In the same heartbeat the hawk plunged down toward the clearing. Snowkit screamed as the cruel talons fastened onto her back. The great wings flapped. Sandstorm raced forward, but Smallear was faster still. As the hawk lifted off, she sprang upward and snagged her claws in the white kit's fur.

For a couple of agonizing moments both cats dangled from the hawk's claws. Sandstorm launched himself into the air, but they were too high. Then the hawk released the kit with one foot and scored its talons across Smallear's face. The she-cat lost her grip and fell back, landing heavily on the ground. Without her weight, the hawk mounted rapidly to treetop height and flew off toward Fourtrees. Snowkit's terrified crying died away.

"No!" Smallear threw her head back and let out a yowl of pure

desperation. "My kit! Oh, my kit!"

Sorreltail dashed past Sandstorm, leaping the camp wall at a place where the rebuilding had barely started, and vanished into the forest. Even though Sandstorm knew the pursuit was hopeless, he swung around and caught the eye of the nearest cat. "Swiftpaw, go with him."

Swiftpaw opened her mouth to protest, clearly aware that the pursuit would be hopeless, then closed it again and took off after Sorreltail. The rest of the cats, stunned by shock, gradually crept out into the clearing again and formed a ragged circle around Smallear.

"She couldn't hear," Fireheart murmured, touching her nose and Sandstorm's cheek. "She couldn't hear the hawk, and she couldn't hear us when we tried to warn her."

"It's my fault!" Smallear wailed. "I left her... and now she's gone. The hawk should have taken me instead!"

Fireheart moved closer to the tabby queen, pressing herself comfortingly against her side, and Cinderpelt came up and gave her ears a gentle lick. "Come to my den," he mewed softly. "We'll look after you, We won't leave you."

But Smallear refused to be comforted. "She's gone and it's my fault," she whispered.

"It's not your fault," meowed Oakstar.

Sandstorm turned to see his leader pacing toward them. The broad-shouldered reddish-brown she-cat looked strong and determined, more like a warrior than any of the other cats, crushed as they were by the tragedy of Snowkit's loss.

"It's not your fault," she repeated. "Whoever heard of a hawk that dared to swoop down and take a kit from the middle of a camp, with so many other cats around? This is a sign from Starclan. I cannot deny the truth any longer." Oakstar gazed at her shocked, assembled Clan, and her voice vibrated with anger. "Starclan is at

war with Thunderclan!"

Chapter 9

As her Clan stared at her in horror, Oakstar spun around and stalked away to her den. Sandstorm took a pace after her, but without turning her head she snapped, "Leave me alone!" There was so much venom in her voice that Sandstorm stopped in his tracks.

What am I supposed to do now? he asked himself. He could see that the Clan was on the edge of panic. The shock of the hawk's attack, and Oakstar's interruption of it, was turning them into frightened kits. His own legs were shaking, but he pushed his fears away and sprang onto the Highrock.

"Listen!" he called. "Gather around, all of you."

Gradually the cats obeyed him, creeping into a huddle at the base of the rock. Several of them glanced fearfully up at the sky, as if they expected the hawk to return. Sandstorm noticed Dustpaw pressing close to Ferncloud, and Longtail crouched on the ground as if he thought Starclan were going to start raining fire on them there and then.

And then Sandstorm spotted Brightpaw. The apprentice was gazing around in bewilderment. "What's all the fuss about?" he meowed to Cloudpaw. "Every cat knows Starclan is just a tale for kits. They can't really do anything to us."

Cloudpaw faced him with shock in her eyes. "Brightpaw, that's not true!" she exclaimed.

"Come on!" Brightpaw gave her an affectionate flick with his tail. "You don't really believe that load of thistledown, do you?" He showed his indifference by sitting down and giving his paws a thorough wash.

Sandstorm stared down at his apprentice with cold dread chilling the blood in his veins. He had known for a long time that Brightpaw had no respect for the warrior code, but he had not realized that his

apprentice did not believe in Starclan at all.

On the other side of the clearing, Cinderpelt and Whitestorm were gently guiding Smallear in the direction of Cinderpelt's den. Cinderpelt stopped, mewed something rapidly to Whitestorm, and came limping back toward the rock.

"I think you might need me, Sandstorm," he mewed. "But make it quick. I have to take care of Smallear."

Sandstorm nodded. "Cats of Thunderclan," he began, raising his voice, "we've just seen something terrible. No cat can deny that. But we have to be careful about what meaning we give to this tragedy. Cinderpelt, is Oakstar right? Does this mean that Starclan has abandoned us?"

Cinderpelt spoke up clearly from where he sat at the base of the rock. "No," he meowed. "Starclan hasn't shown me anything to suggest this. The camp is more exposed since the fire, so it's not surprising that the hawk could see its prey."

"So it was just an accident that we lost Snowkit?" Sandstorm prompted.

"Just an accident," Cinderpelt repeated. "Nothing to do with Starclan."

Sandstorm saw the Clan begin to relax and realized that Cinderpelt's certainty had reassured them. The cats still looked shocked and grief-stricken that Snowkit had been snatched away, but the wild stares of panic were fading.

But along with his relief came the worry that once the Clan had recovered from their shock, they would start asking themselves why Oakstar had gone so far as to declare war on their warrior ancestors in Starclan. "Thank you, Cinderpelt," Sandstorm meowed.

Cinderpelt flicked his tail and limped quickly toward his den.

Sandstorm took a step forward on top of the rock and gazed down at the upturned faces. "There's something else I need to tell you," he began. He wasn't at all sure he should be saying this, since Oakstar

insisted that Windclan was responsible for the dead rabbits, but with the safety of the Clan at stake he couldn't keep silent. "We think there's a loose dog on Thunderclan territory. We haven't seen it, but we've scented it at Snakerocks and near Fourtrees."

An anxious murmur rose from the cats, and Fireheart called out, "What about the dogs at the farm beyond Windclan territory? Maybe it's one of those."

"Maybe," Sandstorm agreed, remembering how the savage creatures had chased him and Fireheart while they were searching for Brightpaw. "Until it goes away again," he went on, "we all have to be especially careful. Apprentices mustn't go out without a warrior. And all cats who leave camp have an extra duty. Look for traces of this dog—scent, pawmarks, scattered scraps of prey..."

"And dung," Mousefur put in. "The filthy creatures never think of burying it."

"Right," meowed Sandstorm. "If you come across anything like that, report it to me right away. We need to find out where the dog has made its den."

As he gave his orders he did his best to hide his growing sense of dread. He could not stifle the feeling that the forest was watching him, concealing a deadly enemy somewhere among the trees. At least the threat from Goldenstar was a straightforward fear of attack from a known enemy. This hidden dog was another matter, unseen and unpredictable.

Dismissing the Clan, Sandstorm leaped down from the Highrock and made his way toward Cinderpelt's den. On the way, he spotted Sorreltail limping back into the camp with Swiftpaw just behind him. The tortoiseshell and white warrior's fur was torn where had had forced his way through briars and undergrowth in his pursuit of the hawk. One look at his lowered head and dejected expression told Sandstorm all he needed to know, but he waited for Sorreltail to come up and make his report.

"I'm sorry, Sandstorm. We tried to keep up, but we lost it."

"You did your best," Sandstorm replied, pressing his head against the younger warrior's shoulder. "There was never much hope."

"A waste of time and effort right from the start," Swiftpaw growled, though her eyes betrayed her frustration at their failure to save the kit.

"Where's Smallear?" asked Sorreltail.

"With Cinderpelt. I'm just going to check on her. You two help yourself to fresh-kill and then get some rest."

He waited to see that the two cats obeyed his order before continuing to Cinderpelt's den. Fireheart fell into step beside him. When they reached the clearing outside the medicine cat's den, they found Smallear lying there with Whitestorm crouched beside her, licking her gently.

Cinderpelt emerged from the cleft in the rock carrying a folded leaf in his mouth, which he set down on the ground in front of Smallear. "Poppy seeds," he mewed. "Eat them, Smallear, and they'll make you sleep."

At first Sandstorm thought Smallear had not heard him, then she half sat up, turned her head, and slowly licked up the poppy seeds from the leaf.

"I'll never have any more kits," she mewed, her voice hoarse. "I'll be going to join the elders now."

"And they'll welcome you," Fireheart murmured, crouching beside the older cat as the poppy seeds took effect and her head gradually lowered into sleep. Sandstorm glanced admiringly at Fireheart; she was a skilled warrior, and he had reason to know the sharpness of her tongue, but she had a gentle side too.

He was roused from his thoughts when he heard Cinderpelt clearing his throat, and he saw that the medicine cat had padded over to sit beside him. From the look he was giving him he realized that he must have spoken to him and was waiting for a response.

"Sorry—what?" he mewed.

"*If* you're not too busy to listen," Cinderpelt meowed dryly. "I said that I'll keep Smallear with me overnight."

"Good idea, thanks." Sandstorm remembered that Cinderpelt had been with Smallear when he had been telling the Clan about the loose dog. "There's something else you need to know, and I'd like you to have another look at Oakstar."

"Oh? What's the matter with her?"

Speaking softly so that Fireheart did not hear him, Sandstorm told Cinderpelt about the evidence that a dog was loose in the forest, and how Oakstar was convinced that it must be Windclan invading Thunderclan territory to steal prey. "She's so confused," he finished. "She must be, to declare war on Starclan like that. And there's a Gathering in a few nights. What's going to happen if she starts accusing Windclan in front of the other cats?"

"Now wait a minute," Cinderpelt meowed. "This is your Clan leader you're talking about. You should respect her opinion even if you don't agree with them."

"This isn't just a disagreement!" Sandstorm protested. "There isn't a scrap of proof for what she suggests." His raised voice made Fireheart prick up her ears as she lay beside Smallear, and he lowered it again as he added, "Oakstar was a great leader. Every cat knows that. But now... I can't trust her judgment, Cinderpelt. Not when she isn't making any sense."

"You should still try to understand her. Show her a bit of sympathy, at least. She deserves that from every cat."

For a few heartbeats Sandstorm felt outraged that Cinderpelt, who had once been his apprentice, should be talking to him like this. It wasn't Cinderpelt who had to defend Oakstar's decisions and try to hide her confusion so that her own Clan still trusted her. Not to mention making excuses for her to all the other Clans so that no cat would guess the weakness at Thunderclan's heart.

"Do you think I haven't tried?" he snapped. "If I'm any more sympathetic, my fur will fall out!"

"Your fur looks fine to me," Cinderpelt remarked.

"Look..." Sandstorm made one last effort to suppress his annoyance. "Oakstar missed the last Gathering. If she doesn't go to the nest one, every cat in the forest will know something's wrong. Can't you give her something to make her a bit more reasonable?"

"I'll try. But there's a limit to what my herbs can do. She's gotten over the effects of the fire, you know. This trouble started long before that, when she first found out about Goldenstar. She's old and tired, and she thinks she's losing everything she believed in, even Starclan."

"Especially Starclan," Sandstorm agreed. "And if she—"

He broke off, realizing that Fireheart had left Smallear and was walking toward him. "Finished talking secrets?" she mewed with an edge to her voice. Flicking her tail toward Smallear, she added, "She's asleep. I'll leave her to you, Cinderpelt."

"Thanks for your help, Fireheart."

Both cats were being very polite to each other but somehow Sandstorm felt it wouldn't take much for them to unsheathe their claws. He wondered why, then decided he didn't have time to worry about petty squabbles.

"We'll go and eat, then," he meowed.

"And afterward you need to rest," Fireheart told him. "You've been on your paws since dawn."

She gave him a nudge, propelling him toward the main clearing. Before he had taken more than a couple of paces, Cinderpelt called after him, "Send some fresh-kill for me and Smallear. If you've got time, that is."

"Of course I've got time." Sandstorm felt completely baffled by the tension that had chilled the air. "I'll see to it right away."

"Good." Cinderpelt gave him a curt nod, and Sandstorm felt his blue gaze trained on his back all the way across the clearing.

Chapter 10

The stars of Silverpelt blazed from a clear sky, and the full moon rode high. Sandstorm crouched at the top of the hollow leading down to Fourtrees. Beneath the four great oaks, the ground was carpeted with fallen leaves, glittering in the forest frost of leaf-fall. Black shapes of cats moved to and fro against the pale shimmer.

This time Oakstar had insisted on leading her Clan to the Gathering. Sandstorm couldn't decide whether that was a good thing or not. True, now he didn't have to invent excuses for her, but he was also worried about what she might say. As Thunderclan's problems piled up, it was becoming more and more difficult to present a strong face to their rival Clans, and his apprehension bit deeper when he admitted to himself that he could no longer trust his leader's judgment.

He edged toward her, out of earshot of Brightpaw and Mousefur, who were beside him. "Oakstar," he murmured. "What will you—"

As if she hadn't heard him, Oakstar signaled with her tail and the Thunderclan cats sprang to their paws and raced down through the bushes into the hollow. Sandstorm had no option but to follow. Before they left the camp, Oakstar had refused to talk about the coming Gathering, and now his last chance to discuss it with her had gone.

Down in the hollow there were fewer cats than Sandstorm had expected, and he realized they were all from Windclan and Shadowclan. He spotted Tallstar and Goldenstar seated side by side at the base of the Great Rock. Oakstar walked straight past them, her tail stiff as if she were advancing on an enemy. Without acknowledging them with so much as the flick of a whisker, she leaped up to the Great Rock and sat there, her dark reddish-brown fur glowing in the moonlight.

Sandstorm took a deep breath and tried to calm the fears that welled inside him. Oakstar had already convinced herself that

Tallstar was her enemy; to see the Windclan leader talking privately with Goldenstar, the traitor Oakstar feared most, would make her sure that she was right.

As he watched, Sandstorm saw Tallstar lean over to Goldenstar and meow something; Goldenstar flicked his tail dismissively. Sandstorm wondered if he should creep closer to listen to what they were saying, but before he could move he felt a friendly nudge at his shoulder and looked around to see Smokefur, a warrior of Windclan.

"Hi, there," Smokefur meowed. "Do you remember who this is?"

He pushed a young cat forward, a tabby with bright eyes and ears pricked with excitement. "This is Cloudrunner's kit," Smokefur explained. "She's my apprentice now—Gorsepaw. Isn't she big now?"

"Cloudrunner's kit, of course! I saw you at the last Gathering." Sandstorm still found it hard to believe that this well-muscled apprentice was the same scrap of fur whom he had carried across the Thunderpath when he and Silverstream brought Windclan home.

"Mother told me about you, Sandstorm." Gorsepaw mewed shyly. "How you carried me, and everything."

"Well, I'm glad I don't have to carry you now," Sandstorm replied. "If you grow much more, you'll be able to join Lionclan!"

Gorsepaw purred happily. Sandstorm was sharply aware of the warm friendship that he felt for these cats, which had survived all the skirmishing and disagreements since that long-ago journey.

"We should be starting the meeting," Smokefur went on. "But there's no sign of Riverclan."

The words were hardly out of his mouth when there was a stir among the bushes at the other side of the clearing. A group of Riverclan cats appeared, padding close together into the open. Stalking proudly at their head was Leopardfur.

"Where's Willowstar?" Smokefur wondered out loud.

"I heard he's ill," Sandstorm meowed, realizing that he wasn't surprised to see Leopardfur taking his leader's place. From what Silverstream had told him by the river half a moon ago, he hadn't expected the Riverclan leader to be well enough to attend a Gathering.

Leopardfur walked straight toward the base of the Great Rock, where Tallstar and Goldenstar were sitting, He dipped his head courteously and settled down beside them.

Sandstorm was too far away to hear what they were saying, and he was distracted a moment later as a familiar silver tabby warrior bounded across the clearing to his side.

"Silverstream!" Sandstorm gave a welcoming mew. "I thought you weren't allowed to come to Gatherings."

"I wasn't," replied Silverstream, touching noses with his friend. "But Stonefur said I should have a chance to prove my loyalty."

"Stonefur?" Sandstorm echoed. He had noticed both of Oakstar's kits, Stonefur and her sister, Blackclaw, among the cats who followed Leopardfur. "What's it got to do with her?"

"Stonefur's our new deputy," meowed Silverstream. He frowned. "Oh, of course you don't know. Willowstar died two nights ago. Leopardstar is our leader now."

Sandstorm was silent for a moment, remembering the dignified old cat who had helped Thunderclan during the fire. The news of Willowstar's death didn't surprise him, but it still brought a pang of anxiety. Leopardstar would be a strong leader, good for Riverclan, but he had no love for Thunderclan.

"He's already started to reorganize the Clan, even though it's barely been a day since he went to the Moonstone to speak with Starclan," Silverstream went on, pulling a face. "Supervising the apprentice training, ordering more patrols. And—" He broke off, his paws working on the ground in front of him.

"Silverstream!" Sandstorm was alarmed at his friend's clear

agitation. "What's the matter?"

Silverstream lifted anguished blue eyes to gaze at his friend. "There's something you ought to know, Sandstorm." He took a quick glance around to make sure no Riverclan cats were within earshot. "Ever since the fire, Leopardstar has been planning how to get Sunningrocks back."

"I... I don't think you should be telling me that," Sandstorm stammered, staring at his friend in dismay. Sunningrocks was a long-disputed territory on the border between Thunderclan and Riverclan. Bluefur and the former Thunderclan deputy, Redtail, had both died in battle over it. For Silverstream to tell Sandstorm of his new leader's intentions was an act of betrayal that went completely against the warrior code.

"I know, Sandstorm." Silverstream couldn't meet his gaze, and his voice shook with the weight of what he was doing. "I have tried to be a loyal warrior of Riverclan—no cat could have tried harder!" His voice was rising in desperation, but with a huge effort he managed to control himself and go on in a lower voice. "But I can't sit by and do nothing while Leopardstar plans to attack Thunderclan. If it comes to a battle, I don't know what I'll do."

Sandstorm moved closer, trying to comfort the silver tabby warrior. He had always known, ever since Silverstream had crossed the river, that sooner or later his friend would have to face the ordeal of fighting against his birth Clan. Now it seemed as if that day had suddenly drawn closer.

"When is this attack going to happen?" he asked.

Silverstream shook his head. "I've no idea. Even if Leopardstar has decided, he wouldn't tell me. I only know about the plan from what the other warriors have said. But I'll see what I can find out, if you like."

For a moment Sandstorm was excited by the thought of having a spy in the Riverclan camp. Then he realized what a fearful risk Silverstream would be taking. He couldn't put his friend in that much danger, or add to the pain of his divided loyalties. Unless

Thunderclan struck first, without waiting for Leopardstar to attack —which Sandstorm didn't want to do—they would just have to deal with the threat when it arose.

"No, it's too dangerous," Sandstorm replied. "I'm grateful for the warning, but think what Leopardstar would do to you if he found out. He doesn't exactly like you as it is. I'll tell all the hunting patrols to keep checking Sunningrocks for Riverclan scent, and make sure our scent markings are strong there."

Yowling from the top of the Great Rock interrupted him. He turned to see that the other three leaders had joined Oakstar, who still refused to look at Goldenstar, and were waiting to begin the meeting. When the cats had fallen silent, Goldenstar nodded to Leopardstar, indicating that he should speak first. The dappled golden tabby took a place at the front of the rock and looked down.

"Our former leader, Willowstar, has gone to join Starclan," he announced. "He was a noble leader and all his Clan mourns his passing. I am leader of Riverclan now, and Stonefur is my deputy. Last night I traveled to Highstones and received my nine lives from Starclan."

"Congratulations," meowed Goldenstar, while Tallstar mewed, "Willowstar will be missed by all the Clans. But may Starclan grant that Riverclan thrives under your leadership."

Leopardstar thanked them and looked expectantly at Oakstar, but the Thunderclan leader was gazing down into the hollow. There was an expression of pride on her face, and when Sandstorm followed her gaze, he saw that she was looking at Stonefur. The obvious admiration for her daughter shocked him, and his heart grew cold when he remembered that Goldenstar knew a pair of Thunderclan kits had once been taken in by Riverclan. Sandstorm couldn't help noticing that Goldenstar's gaze was trained on Oakstar, and the massive tabby had a thoughtful look on his face. What would it take for him to guess who the mother of those kits had been?

"I have one more piece of Clan news," Leopardstar meowed, obviously deciding that he had waited long enough for Oakstar to

speak. "One of our elders, Rippleclaw, is dead."

Sandstorm's ears pricked. He wondered what Blackclaw and Silverstream had told their leader about Rippleclaw's death, and if he had left any of his own scent on her body. Leopardstar could possibly use that to accuse Thunderclan of killing the old cat, to give his Clan an excuse to attack.

But when Leopardstar went on, it was only to say, "She was a brave warrior and the mother of many kits." He paused to cast a sympathetic glance at Blackclaw and Stonefur. "Her Clan mourns her," he finished.

Sandstorm relaxed, then felt himself tense again as Goldenstar stepped forward. Would the Shadowclan leader announce what he knew about two of Rippleclaw's kits?

To his relief, Goldenstar made no mention of the secret. Instead he gave news of Shadowclan kits that had been made into apprentices and the birth of a new litter—details that showed how Shadowclan was beginning to recover its strength, but nothing that suggested hostility to any other Clan.

Hope flared in Sandstorm again. Perhaps there really was no need to keep worrying about a threat from Goldenstar. It would be a relief to forget him and concentrate on the lurking throat of the dog in the forest. Then Sandstorm remembered the Shadowclan leader's brutal treatment of Rippleclaw, which had led to her death, and all his suspicions returned.

When Goldenstar had finished speaking, Tallstar moved to take his place, but Oakstar thrust herself in front of the Windclan leader. "*I* will speak next," she growled, giving Tallstar a hard stare.

She stalked to the front of the rock. "Cats of all Clans," she began, her voice coldly angry, "I bring news of theft. Windclan warriors have been hunting in Thunderclan territory."

Sandstorm's heart lurched as angry yowling broke out all over the hollow. The Windclan cats sprang to their paws, furiously denying the Thunderclan leader's accusation.

Brightpaw scrambled around two bigger warriors and came to a halt beside Sandstorm, his blue eyes wide with shock and excitement. "*Windclan!*" he meowed. "What's she talking about?"

"Be quiet!" Sandstorm snapped. He glanced at Smokefur, afraid that he might have overheard Brightpaw's outburst, but the gray warrior was on his paws, yowling defiance at Oakstar.

"Prove it!" he called, his fur bristling. "Prove that Windclan has taken so much as a mouse!"

"I have proof," Oakstar's eyes blazed cold fire. "Our patrols found rabbit remains scattered not far from here."

"You call that proof?" Tallstar shouldered her way forward to stand nose-to-nose with Oakstar. "Did you see my cats on your territory? Did your patrols find Windclan scent?"

"I don't need to see or smell thieves to know what they have done," Oakstar retorted. "Every cat knows that only Windclan hunts rabbits."

Sandstorm's muscles tensed, and he instinctively unsheathed his claws.

"All this is a pile of mouse dung," Tallstar insisted. Her black and white fur was fluffed out, and her lips were drawn back in a snarl. "Windclan has lost prey as well. We have found rabbit remains on our territory too. And there are far fewer rabbits than usual this season. I accuse *you*, Oakstar, of letting your warriors hunt on our land and making false accusations to cover up theft!"

"That seems far more likely," Goldenstar put in, his yellow eyes gleaming. "Every cat knows that prey has been scarce on Thunderclan territory since the fire. Your Clan is hungry, Oakstar, and *some* of your warriors know Windclan territory very well."

Sandstorm felt the Shadowclan leader's gaze rest on him, and knew Goldenstar meant him and Silverstream.

Oakstar whipped around to face the Shadowclan leader. "Silence!" she hissed. "Stay away from me and my Clan. This is no business of

yours."

"It is the business of every cat in the forest," Goldenstar replied calmly. "The Gathering is supposed to be a time of peace. If Starclan is angered, we will all suffer."

"Starclan!" Oakstar spat back at him. "Starclan has turned away from us, and I will fight them if I have to. I care only for feeding my Clan, and I will not stand by while other cats steal our prey."

Her speech was almost drowned by the shocked gasps of the cats listening below. Sandstorm couldn't help glancing up to see if Starclan would show their fury by sending a cloud to cover the moon and end the Gathering, as they had done once before. But the sky remained clear. Did that mean Starclan had accepted Oakstar's declaration of war?

Silverstream nudged him. "What's the matter with Oakstar? Does she *want* to pick a fight with Windclan? And what's all this about fighting Starclan?"

"I don't know what she wants," Sandstorm muttered.

"I think she's right about the rabbits, and who cares what a stupid old tradition says about keeping the peace at the Gatherings?" meowed Brightpaw. "Let's face it, Starclan was just thought up by some leader to scare the other cats into being obedient."

Sandstorm shot his apprentice a disapproving glance, but there was no time to discuss his attitude toward their warrior ancestors. His heart thudded as if he were about to leap into battle. There was no way of hiding Oakstar's madness—and Thunderclan's vulnerability —from the other Clans now. Tallstar bristled with fury. So far Leopardstar had not joined in the argument, but he wore the expression of a cat who was about to sink his teeth into a juicy piece of fresh-kill.

When the noise in the hollow had died down, Tallstar made herself heard."Oakstar, I swear by Starclan that no cat from Windclan has hunted on your territory." Her tail lashed from side to side. "But if you insist on fighting with us, we will be ready." She retreated from

the edge of the rock and turned her back on Oakstar, a pointed refusal to defend herself any further.

Before Oakstar could retaliate, Leopardstar stepped forward. "The fire was a terrible misfortune," he meowed. "Every cat in the forest knows that, but yours is not the only Clan to suffer recently. Your forest will grow back as rich in prey as it ever was. But Twolegs have invaded our territory and they show no signs of leaving. Last leaf-bare the river was poisoned and cats who ate the fish fell ill. Who can guarantee it won't happen again? I cannot speak for Windclan's needs, but Riverclan needs better hunting ground even more than Thunderclan."

A few Riverclan cats yowled their agreement, and Sandstorm's fur bristled with apprehension. He shot a glance at Silverstream, remembering his friend's warning about Sunningrocks. The new Riverclan leader meant to expand his territory, and the logical direction was across the river into Thunderclan land. The gorge cut him off from Windclan territory, and all his other borders were bounded by Twoleg farms.

But Oakstar had not understood the veiled threat. When the Riverclan leader fell silent she dipped her head graciously. "You're right, Leopardstar," she meowed. "Riverclan has endured hard times. Yet your cats are so strong and noble that I know you will survive."

Leopardstar looked taken aback—as well he might, Sandstorm thought. The old Oakstar would never have missed the ominous promise in Leopardstar's words.

Goldenstar took a step toward the Thunderclan leader. "Think carefully before you threaten Windclan, Oakstar," he warned. "There will never be peace in the forest if—"

Oakstar bared her teeth and snarled at him, her fur bristling with fury. "Don't talk to me about peace!" she hissed. "I told you to keep out of this. Unless you're allying yourself with that thief over there."

Sandstorm watched Tallstar stalk over to Oakstar, and he guessed that the Windclan leader was barely managing not to spring at her

throat. "If you want a fight, you'll have one, Oakstar," she growled. Not waiting for a reply, she leaped down from the rock.

Goldenstar exchanged a glance with Leopardstar and both leaders followed, leaving Oakstar alone. Sandstorm glanced at the sky again, hardly able to believe there was no sign from Starclan to show that they had seen the Gathering descend into hostility. Did that mean Starclan *wanted* a war between the Clans?

As Oakstar scrambled down from the rock, Sandstorm looked around for the other Thunderclan warriors. "Brightpaw," he instructed urgently, "round up as many of our warriors as you can find and send them to the base of the Great Rock. Oakstar will need an escort."

His apprentice nodded and slipped away into the crowd. Sandstorm saw Stonefur thrusting her way through the crowd toward Silverstream.

"Are you ready?" the Riverclan deputy meowed. "Leopardstar wants to leave quickly."

"On my way," Silverstream mewed, springing to his paws. His voice shook as he added, "Good-bye, Sandstorm."

"Good-bye," Sandstorm replied. There was so much more he wanted to say, but once again he had to face the fact that his best friend belonged to another Clan, and the next time they met could be in battle.

Before the two Riverclan cats turned away, he sought desperately for the right words to speak to Stonefur. "Congratulations," he stammered at last. "I was glad to hear Leopardstar chose you as deputy. Thunderclan doesn't want trouble, you know."

Stonefur met his eyes. "Nor do I," she meowed. "But sometimes trouble comes anyway."

Sandstorm watched them as they headed for the edge of the clearing, and noticed with a jolt that another cat had his gaze fixed on the Riverclan deputy. It was Goldenstar!

Sandstorm wondered what his thoughtful look meant. Was the Shadowclan leader sizing up a future ally? Or could he possibly suspect that the she-cat was one of the kits Rippleclaw had told him of, the kits that came from Thunderclan? After all, it was common knowledge that Stonefur and Blackclaw had been raised by Rippleclaw. If so, it wouldn't be long before Goldenstar realized who their real mother was.

Sandstorm was so preoccupied that it was a few moments before he realized that the cat sitting in the shadows beside Goldenstar was Darkstripe. He told himself that it was only natural for Goldenstar's oldest friend to seek him out at a Gathering, but Sandstorm didn't like it. He still wasn't sure of Darkstripe's loyalty.

Springing to his paws, he pushed through the cats toward them. As he approached, he heard Goldenstar meowed to his companion, "Are my kits well?"

"Very well," the Thunderclan warrior replied warmly. "Growing big and strong—especially young Squirrelkit."

"Darkstripe!" Sandstorm interrupted her. "The Gathering's over, or hadn't you noticed? Oakstar will want to leave shortly."

"Keep your fur on, Sandstorm." Darkstripe's voice was an insolent drawl. "I'm coming."

"Go on, Darkstripe; you mustn't keep your deputy waiting," meowed Goldenstar. He nodded to Sandstorm, his yellow gaze was carefully neutral.

Sandstorm padded across the clearing to join Oakstar with Darkstripe just behind him. The rest of her warriors were clustered around her, shielding her from the hostile glares and mutterings of Windclan. Her amber eyes still glowed with defiance, and Sandstorm realized with a sinking heart that war between the two Clans could not be far away.

Chapter 11

The sun was rising over the trees as Sandstorm emerged from the warriors' den. Shaking a scrap of dead leaf from his fur, he took a deep breath of the crisp air and extended his forelegs in a long stretch.

After the previous night's Gathering, he was almost surprised to see life in the camp going on as usual. Ashpaw and Brightpaw were busily patching the outer wall with twigs, Tigerclaw and Willowpelt were watching their kits just outside the nursery, where Cloudpaw had stopped to play with them; and Brindleface was padding into the clearing with his jaws full of fresh-kill. Sandstorm could sense tension in the air, but so far none of his fears of attack seemed to have come to anything.

He looked around for Fireheart, who had led the dawn patrol, but she didn't seem to be back yet. She had not been among the cats who had gone to the Gathering, and Sandstorm desperately wanted to talk to her about what had happened.

"Sandstorm!"

The voice was Oakstar's. Sandstorm swung around to see his leader trotting across the clearing from her den.

"Yes, Oakstar, what is it?"

Oakstar jerked her head. "Come to my den. We need to talk."

As Sandstorm followed her he noticed her jerky steps and twitching tail. She looked like a cat about to launch herself into battle, yet there was no enemy in sight.

Reaching her den, the dark reddish-brown she-cat padded across to her bedding and sat there facing Sandstorm. "You heard that hypocrite Tallstar last night," she hissed. "She refused to admit that

her cats have been stealing our prey. So there's only one thing for Thunderclan to do. We must attack!"

Sandstorm stared at her, jaws gaping. "But, Oakstar," he stammered, "we can't do that! Our Clan isn't strong enough." He couldn't help remembering that they would have had four extra warriors by now if Oakstar had agreed to promote the apprentices, but he didn't dare mention that to her. "We can't afford to have warriors injured or maybe killed."

Oakstar fixed her eyes on him in a look of fierce hostility. "Are you saying that Thunderclan is too weak to defend itself?"

"Defending ourselves is very different from launching an attack," Sandstorm meowed desperately. "Besides, there's no real proof that Windclan stole—"

Oakstar bared her teeth. Her fur bristled as she rose to her paws and took a threatening step toward Sandstorm. "Are you questioning me?" she snarled.

With an effort, Sandstorm stood his ground. "I don't want needless bloodshed," he told her quietly. "All the signs tell us that there's a dog loose in the forest, and that's what has been taking the rabbits."

"And I tell you that dogs don't wander alone! They come and go with their Twolegs."

"Then where did the dog scent come from?"

"*Silence!*" Oakstar lashed out with one paw, barely missing Sandstorm's nose. He forced himself to stand still. "We will travel tonight and attack Windclan at dawn."

Sandstorm's heart lurched. It was an honor for a warrior to fight for his Clan, but never before had he been faced with such an unjust battle. He did not want to shed Thunderclan or Windclan blood for no good reason.

"Did you hear me, Sandstorm?" Oakstar demanded. "You will choose the warriors and give them their orders. They must be ready by moonset." Her eyes were amber flames; Sandstorm almost felt they

could sear him to ash, just as the fire had destroyed the forest.

"Yes, Oakstar, but—" he began.

"Are you afraid of Windclan?" the old leader spat. "Or are you so used to cringing before Starclan that you won't defy them and fight for the rights of your Clan?" She paced to one side of her den, spun around, and paced back again, thrusting out her muzzle toward her deputy. "You disappoint me, you, out of all my warriors. How can I believe you will fight with all your strength when you question my order like this?" she hissed. "You leave me no choice, Sandstorm. I will lead this attack myself."

Objections raced through Sandstorm's mind. Oakstar was growing old and losing strength; she was on her last life; she wasn't thinking clearly. But in the face of her fury he could voice none of them. Instead he dipped his head respectfully. "If you wish, Oakstar."

"Then go and do as I ordered." She kept that fiery gaze trained on him as he backed out of the den. "You will come with us, but remember that I will be watching you," she growled after him.

In the clearing outside, Sandstorm shivered as if he had just dragged himself out of icy water. His duty was to choose the warriors for the attack on Windclan, and tell them what Oakstar had ordered so that they would be ready to leave after moonset. Yet every hair on his pelt protested against this. A dog had stolen the rabbits, not Windclan. It could *not* be the will of Starclan to attack an innocent Clan! Oakstar was simply wrong.

Sandstorm found that his paws were taking him to Cinderpelt's den. Perhaps he could advise him. The medicine cat's wisdom and his special bond with Starclan might help him to see the way forward more clearly than he could. But when he reached Cinderpelt's clearing and called out him, there was no reply. Sandstorm stuck his head a little way into the cleft in the rock and saw that the den was empty, except for the neat piles of herbs stacked along one side.

As he pushed his way out of the fern tunnel, not sure what to do now, he caught sight of Blossompaw padding past with a load of

moss for the elders' bedding. The apprentice dropped his burden when he saw the deputy and meowed, "Cinderpelt's out collecting herbs, Sandstorm."

"Where?" Sandstorm asked. If he was near the camp, he could go and find him.

But Blossompaw shrugged. "Dunno, sorry." He picked up the moss and went on.

Sandstorm stood motionless for a few moments, his head spinning with fear and confusion. He could not ask any of the other cats for advice, because a deputy should never question his leader's orders. He could no even talk to Fireheart, much as he wanted to, because she was bound by the warrior code to obey her leader. There was only one hope left.

Slowly he padded back to the warriors' den, meeting Whitestorm on her way out. "I'm going to catch up on some sleep," he explained in answer to her inquiring look. "I want to be fir for a night patrol." He couldn't bring himself to tell her what was really planned for that night.

Whitestorm's eyes softened with sympathy. "You do look a bit tired," she meowed. "You're working too hard, Sandstorm."

She gave his ear a quick lick and padded off toward the pile of fresh-kill. To Sandstorm's relief, no other cats were inside the den, and he did not have to answer any more questions as he curled himself deeply into the moss and fern. If he could just sleep for a while, he might be able to meet with Spottedleaf and ask for his guidance.

Then he remembered his previous dream, when he had searched for Spottedleaf in the dark and fearful forest and failed to find him.

"Oh, Spottedleaf, come to me now," he murmured. "I need you. I have to know what Starclan wants me to do."

Sandstorm found himself standing on the border of Windclan territory and looked across the stretch of bare moorland. A stiff

breeze rippled over the grass, blowing through his fur. The moor was bounded by an eerie light, hiding the horizon and the land behind Sandstorm; he looked back, expecting to see the oaks of Fourtrees, though he could not remember traveling through the forest, but there was nothing there but the pale yellow glow. No cats were in sight.

"Spottedleaf?" he mewed uncertainly.

There was no reply, but he thought he caught a faint trace of the sweet scent that always announced his presence. He stiffened, raising his head and parting his jaws so that he could drink in the beloved smell.

"Spottedleaf!" he repeated. "Please come—I need you so much."

A sudden warmth crept over him. A soft voice murmured, "I am here, Sandstorm." He sensed that Spottedleaf was somewhere behind him, and that if he turned his head, he would see him. But he could not move. It was as if cold jaws were dripping him, keeping his gaze fixed on the windswept moorland.

As he stood rigid, Sandstorm gradually realized that Spottedleaf was not alone. Another scent wafted over him, painful in its familiarity.

"Raggedpelt?" he whispered. "Is that you?"

A faint breath stirred his pelt, and he thought he could hear Raggedpelt's rusty purr. "Oh, Raggedpelt!" he exclaimed. "I've missed you so much. Are you okay? Have you seen how well Cinderpelt is doing?"

The words spilled out of him in his joy at the reunion with his old friend, but there was no reply, though Sandstorm thought the purring grew stronger.

Then Spottedleaf's voice whispered softly into his ear, "I have brought you here for a reason, Sandstorm. Look at this place; remember it. This is where a battle will no be fought, and blood will not be spilled."

"Then tell me how to stop it," Sandstorm pleaded, knowing that he

spoke of Oakstar's planned raid on the Windclan camp.

But there was nothing more, only a gentle sigh that faded and became one with the wind. The paralysis that had gripped Sandstorm released him, and he whipped around, but Spottedleaf and Raggedpelt had vanished. He drank in the air, desperate for the last trace of their scent, but there was nothing.

"Spottedleaf!" he wailed. "Raggedpelt! Don't go!"

The light began to change, became the ordinary sunlight of a morning in leaf-fall, and instead of the moorland Sandstorm saw above him a ragged pattern of branches against the sky, the fire-damaged covering of the warriors' den. He lay on his side among the moss, panting.

"Sandstorm?" An anxious voice came from just beside him and he turned his head to see Fireheart. She licked the fur around his ears. "Are you all right?"

"Yes—yes, I'm fine." Sandstorm dragged himself into a sitting position and flicked his ears to shake off the clinging moss. "Just a dream, that's all."

"I've been looking for you." Fireheart went on. "We didn't see anything suspicious on the dawn patrol. Mousefur told me what happened at the Gathering. And the pile of fresh-kill is practically all gone. I thought we could go and hunt."

"I can't, not just now, Fireheart. I've things to do. But if you could take a patrol out, that would be great."

Fireheart gazed at him, the sympathetic look in her eyes fading. "Well, okay, if you're too busy." She sounded offended, but Sandstorm didn't know how he could explain. "I'll get Whitestorm and Sorreltail to come." She rose to her paws and stalked out without looking back at him.

Sandstorm licked his paws and rubbed it over his face, clinging to the precious memory of his dream. *A battle will not be fought, and blood will not be spilled,* he repeated to himself. Was Spottedleaf

trying to tell him not to worry, that somehow Starclan would stop the sighting? Or did he mean that it was up to him to see that no blood was spilled?

Sandstorm was tempted to leave it all in the paws of Starclan. What *could* he do, when his Clan leader had given him her orders? But if he obeyed Oakstar, wouldn't he be going against the will of Starclan? And even more, against all his instincts of what was right for his Clan?

Sandstorm made up his mind. Whatever he had to do, Thunderclan must not fight Windclan.

Chapter 12

Sandstorm padded swiftly out of the camp, hoping no other cats would see him and ask him where he was going. The warrior code said that a Clan leader's orders shoulder be obeyed without question. Until now, Sandstorm had always accepted that. He had never imagined that he would ever disobey Oakstar, and yet the time had come when he must challenge her orders to watch the destruction of his Clan. The only way he could see of avoiding the battle was for Tallstar and Oakstar to meet together and talk about the evidence of prey-theft in both their territories. Once Oakstar understood that Windclan was suffering in just the same way as Thunderclan, Sandstorm was sure she would call off the attack.

He did not know what Oakstar would do to him afterward, if she realized that he had gone to see Tallstar without her permission. He just hoped she would eventually understand it was for the good of her Clan.

At the entrance to the gorse tunnel Sandstorm took a last look around at the camp. For a moment he watched Cloudpaw, practicing the hunting crouch all by herself outside the apprentice's den. She crept lightly up on a dead leaf and pounced on it, trapping it with outstretched paws.

"Well done!" Sandstorm called.

Cloudpaw looked up, her eyes glowing. "Thank you, Sandstorm!"

Sandstorm nodded to her, then turned and headed through the gorse tunnel. The short meeting and strengthened his resolve, for the eager young apprentice represented all that was important within the Clan. Sandstorm knew that he could not let that be destroyed.

By sunhigh, Sandstorm was approaching the stream that lay out the route to Fourtrees. He stopped for a moment to rest. In his confusion and anxiety he had not taken time to eat before he left

the camp, and a rustle in the undergrowth reminded him of how hungry he was. He dropped into the hunter's crouch, only to realize a couple of heartbeats later that the sounds were not made by prey. He caught a glimpse of a familiar dark pelt, and breathed in the scent of Thunderclan cats.

Puzzled, Sandstorm pressed himself to the ground behind a clump of fern. He hadn't ordered a patrol in this direction, so why were his Clan cats here now? Then the undergrowth parted and Darkstripe emerged, mewing sharply over her shoulder, "Follow me. Try to keep up, can't you?"

Two small shapes appeared out of the bracken. Sandstorm's eyes widened in surprise as he recognized Tigerclaw's two kits. Squirrelkit bounced into the open, batting at a fallen leaf, while Rowankit followed more slowly.

"I'm tired. My paws ache," the little dark ginger tabby kit complained.

"What, a strong kit like you?" Darkstripe meowed. "Don't be silly. It's not far now."

What isn't far? Sandstorm wondered in alarm. *What are you doing out here, and where are you taking these kits?* He expected to see Tigerclaw with them—surely her kits had never been this far from the nursery before?—but she did not appear.

Squirrelkit scampered over to his sister and gave her a nudge. "Come on—it'll be worth it!" he urged.

Both kits hurried after Darkstripe to a shallow place, where they crossed the stream, squealing in fear and excitement as the water swirled around their paws. On the far side of the stream, Darkstripe veered away from the route that led to Fourtrees, and headed instead along a much narrower path that twisted away under the trees. A burst of outrage shook Sandstorm. He knew exactly where that path led. Darkstripe was taking the kits toward the border with Shadowclan.

Sandstorm had to wait for them to climb the slope beyond the

stream before he dared to emerge from the ferns and follow. By the time he caught up they were approaching the border. The strong reek of Shadowclan reached Sandstorm, and he saw the kits stop and start sniffing the air.

"Yuck, what's that?" Rowankit squealed.

"Is it a fox?" asked Squirrelkit.

"No, it's Shadowclan scent," Darkstripe replied. "Come on, we're nearly there." She led the kits across the border, Rowankit complaining that she was getting the horrid scent all over her paws.

Growing angrier still, Sandstorm slid into the shelter of a hawthorn bush just on the Thunderclan side, where he could watch without being seen.

Close by, Darkstripe had come to a halt. The kits flopped down onto the grass, exhausted, only to spring to their paws again a moment later when a clump of bracken rustled and another cat stepped into the open.

The newcomer was Goldenstar. Sandstorm froze, though he was hardly surprised. He had guessed that Darkstripe had been hoping to curry favor with Goldenstar by bringing his kits to see him, but the Shadowclan leader's prompt appearance suggested that this meeting had been arranged all along.

Sandstorm wondered if Tigerclaw knew about this. She was not here with her kits, so perhaps she didn't even know that Darkstripe had taken them away. She might just think they had gone missing. *She must be frantic,* Sandstorm thought. He tensed his muscles, ready to leap out and confront Darkstripe, but he stayed in his hiding place and made himself concentrate on what was happening in front of him.

Goldenstar padded forward, the muscles rippling under his pale tabby pelt, until he stood in front of his two kits. For a moment he inspected them, and then bent his head to touch noses, first with Squirrelkit and then with Rowankit. Even though they could never have seen such a massive cat before, both kits stood bravely before

him and met his gaze without flinching.

"Do you know who I am?" meowed Goldenstar.

"Darkstripe said she would take us to meet our father," replied Squirrelkit.

"Are you our father?" Rowankit added. "You smell a bit like us."

Goldenstar nodded. "I am."

The kits exchanged a wondering glance as Darkstripe mewed, "This is Goldenstar, the leader of Shadowclan."

Their eyes grew huge, and Squirrelkit breathed, "Wow! You're really a Clan leader?"

When Goldenstar dipped his head in agreement, Rowankit mewed excitedly, "Why can't we come and live with you in your Clan? You must have a really nice den."

Goldenstar shook his head. "Your place is with your mother for now," he told them. "But that doesn't mean I'm not proud of you. They seem fine, strong kits," he meowed to Darkstripe. "When will they be apprenticed?"

"In a moon or so," Darkstripe replied. "It's a pity I have an apprentice already, or I could mentor one of them myself."

Sandstorm's claws dug into the ground as a jolt of anger shot through him. *Oakstar and I decide who the mentors will be, not you, Darkstripe!* He almost hissed the words aloud. *And you're the last cat we would choose,* he added silently.

Goldenstar turned his gaze back to his kits. "Can you hunt?" he asked them. "Can you fight? Do you want to be good warriors?"

Both the kits nodded vigorously. "I'm going to be the best warrior in the Clan!" Squirrelkit boasted.

Rowankit refused to be outdone. "And I'll be the best hunter!"

"Good, good." Goldenstar gave each kit a quick lick on the head.

Sandstorm couldn't help remembering Silverstream, and how his friend had left the Clan of his birth so that he could stay with the kits he loved. Was it possible that Goldenstar was suffering just as much at being parted from Squirrelkit and Rowankit?

Then Sandstorm's blood ran cold as Squirrelkit asked, "Please, Goldenstar, why are you the leader of Shadowclan when our mother is a Thunderclan cat?"

"They don't know?" Goldenstar asked Darkstripe. The warrior shook her head. "Well, then," Goldenstar meowed, turning back to the kits, "That's a long story. Sit down and I'll tell you."

Sandstorm realized this was the moment when he had to interrupt. The last thing he wanted was for Goldenstar to tell the kits a biased account of how he came to leave Thunderclan. One thing was certain: Goldenstar would never admit that he had been a murderer and a traitor.

Rising to his paws, Sandstorm stepped out of the shelter of the hawthorn bush. "Good day, Goldenstar," he meowed. "You're a long way from your camp. And so are you, Darkstripe." His tone sharpened. "What are you doing here with these kits?"

As he padded up to join them, he had the satisfaction of realizing that both Goldenstar and Darkstripe were dumbfounded by his appearance. For a heartbeat they both gaped at him, while the kits bounced across the grass to meet him.

"This is our father!" Rowankit announced excitedly. "We came all the way from camp to see him."

"Why did no cat tell us he was the leader of a Clan?" Squirrelkit piped up.

Sandstorm did not want to answer that question. Instead he confronted Darkstripe with his eyes narrowed. "Well?"

"How did you know we were here?" Darkstripe blustered.

"I saw you crossing the stream. You were making enough racket to wake the whole forest."

"Sandstorm." Goldenstar dipped his head, the courteous greeting of a leader to the deputy of another Clan. There was no hostility in his tone. "Blame me, not Darkstripe. I wanted to see my kits. You wouldn't deny me that, surely?"

"That's all very well," Sandstorm replied in confusion. "But Darkstripe shouldn't have taken them without permission. It's dangerous to let kits wander so far away from their camp." *Especially with that dog loose in the forest,* he added to himself.

"They're not wandering—they're with me," Darkstripe pointed out.

"What is a hawk attacked? There's still little cover in some parts of the forest. Have you forgotten Snowkit?" One of the kits let out a whimper and Sandstorm stopped; he didn't want to frighten them. "Take them back to camp, Darkstripe. Now."

Darkstripe exchanged a glance with Goldenstar and shrugged. To the kits, he meowed, "Come on. Sandstorm has spoken, and we must obey."

The two kits backed away from their father and followed Darkstripe as she set off back to the camp.

"Say good-bye to your father before you go," Sandstorm meowed, forcing himself to speak in a friendly tone. "You'll see him again when you're apprentices and can go to Gatherings."

Both kits turned to mew good-bye.

"Good-bye," Goldenstar replied. "Work hard, and I shall be proud of you."

He and Sandstorm stood side by side as Darkstripe led the kits back down the slope and across the stream. When they had disappeared into the undergrowth. Goldenstar meowed, "Take care of those kits, Sandstorm. I'll be keeping an eye on them."

Sandstorm's heart was pounding. When he had exposed the former

deputy's treachery, Goldenstar had threatened to kill him. Now they were alone once more, with no help nearby for Sandstorm if the Shadowclan leader attacked. Sandstorm's muscles tensed, but Goldenstar made no move toward him.

"I'll see they're looked after," Sandstorm meowed at last. "I'm sure they will be loyal to their Clan. Thunderclan takes care of all its kits."

"Really?" Goldenstar narrowed his yellow eyes. "I'm glad to hear it."

Goldenstar knew about the two kits who had been taken to Rippleclaw, Sandstorm remembered with a jolt. He waited for the Shadowclan leader to challenge him about them. But Goldenstar did not question him, though his knowing expression chilled Sandstorm. It was as though he was well aware that Sandstorm could tell him more.

Instead Goldenstar dipped his head again and mewed, "We shall meet at the next Gathering. I must return to my Clan now." Then he turned and padded away.

Sandstorm made sure the Shadowclan leader had really gone before he turned away too, following the border toward Fourtrees. Much as he hated to admit it, he couldn't see that Darkstripe had done any real harm by taking the kits out of the nursery. Sandstorm would have had to tell them eventually that their father was the leader of Shadowclan. And Goldenstar himself has behaved with more restraint than Sandstorm would have believed possible.

Firmly he put the episode out of his mind. Time was running out. Before sunset, Sandstorm knew, he must speak with Tallstar and find another way to solve the dispute over the stolen prey.

Chapter 13

Sandstorm darted from one clump of gorse to the next as he crossed the moor toward the Windclan camp. He ran with his belly brushing the turf, trying to stay out of sight and longing for the thick undergrowth of his own territory. The last time he had visited the camp, when Thunderclan helped Windclan in a battle against the other two Clans, there had been no need to hide. Now he dared not show himself until he reached Tallstar, or at least met with one of the cats he could call his friends—if any of them were still friendly, after the recent disastrous Gathering. Windclan patrols had attacked him on their territory before; they would be even more hostile now.

The scent of Windclan was all around him, but so far he hadn't seen any cats. The sun had nearly finished crossing the sky. Sandstorm tried not to think about that. He came close to panic when he remembered how little time was left before Oakstar would launch her attack.

He was crossing one of the shallow moorland streams, bounding from rock to rock, when a stronger scent of Windclan cats flooded over him, along with the scent of rabbit. Sandstorm's belly growled in complaint, but he had to ignore it. There was no way he could take Windclan's prey now—and it smelled as if there was a hunting patrol not far behind anyway. Diving into a clump of bracken at the water's edge, he pressed out cautiously to spot the source of the scent.

Three cats were making their way upstream toward him. At the front of the patrol was his old friend Smokefur, and Sandstorm's heart lifted. Gorsepaw was with her mentor; they were both carrying rabbits. But to Sandstorm's dismay, the third cat was Mudclaw, the dark mottled warrior who had stopped Oakstar when she tried to cross Windclan territory to get to Highstones. This cat would never allow Sandstorm to bring his message to Tallstar.

But it seemed that luck—or the favor of Starclan—was on Sandstorm's side. With their jaws full of prey, the Windclan cats were unable to pick up his Thunderclan scent, and they passed within a couple of tail-lengths of him. Then Gorsepaw, who was struggling with a rabbit almost as big as she was, stopped to adjust her grip on it and fell behind the others.

Sandstorm spotted his chance. "Gorsepaw!"

The young cat raised her head, ears pricked.

"Over here, in the bracken."

Gorsepaw turned, and her eyes stretched wide when she saw Sandstorm poking his head out from the rusty fronds. Her mouth opened, but Sandstorm urgently signaled to her to keep silent.

"Listen, Gorsepaw," he mewed. "I want you to tell Smokefur I'm here, but don't let Mudclaw know, okay?" The apprentice hesitated, looking troubled, and Sandstorm added urgently, "I have to talk to him. It's important for both our Clans. You've *got* to trust me."

The desperation in his tone reached Gorsepaw, who paused a moment longer and then gave a quick nod. "All right, Sandstorm. Wait here."

She picked up her rabbit again and hurried to catch up to the two warriors. Sandstorm crept deeper into the bracken and crouched there, waiting. Before long he heard another cat approach his hiding place and murmur, "Sandstorm? Is that you?"

To his relief, Sandstorm recognized Smokefur's voice. He peered warily out of the shelter of the bracken, and straightened up when he saw that his friend was alone.

"Thank Starclan! He exclaimed. "I thought you weren't coming."

"This had better be good, Sandstorm," Smokefur meowed. He gave Sandstorm a hard stare, with no trace of his usual friendliness. "It took me a while to get rid of Mudclaw. If she knew you were on our territory, you'd be crow-food, and you know it." He padded up to Sandstorm. "I'm sticking my neck out for you," he growled. "I hope

it's worth it."

"It is, I promise. I've come to tell you something. I've got to speak to Tallstar. It's important," he added, as Smokefur went on staring at him.

For a few heartbeats he was afraid that his friend was going to refuse, or even attack him and drive him off Windclan territory.

Then Smokefur spoke, and to Sandstorm's relief he sounded less hostile, as if he were beginning to realize the urgency of Sandstorm's request. "What's it all about? Tallstar will have my fur off if I take a Thunderclan cat into camp without a very good reason."

"I can't tell you, Smokefur. I can't tell any cat except Tallstar. But believe me, it's for the food of both our Clans."

Once again Smokefur hesitated. "I wouldn't do this for any cat but you, Sandstorm," he meowed at last. Spinning around, he beckoned with his tail and bounded off across the moor.

Sandstorm sprang after him. Smokefur halted at the top of the slope, looking down into the Windclan camp. The rays of the dying sun cast long shadows over the gorse bushes that lined the sides of the hollow. As Sandstorm and Smokefur stood there, a patrol slipped past them. Sandstorm was conscious of their stares, where curiosity mingled with antagonism.

"Come on," meowed Smokefur. He led the way through the tough stems of gorse until they came to a sandy clearing in the middle of the bushes.

As he emerged through a narrow gap in the thorns, Sandstorm saw Tallstar crouched at one side of the clearing near a pile of fresh-kill. More Windclan warriors clustered around her. It was the Clan deputy, Ashfoot, who looked up first and then nudged his leader, mewing something rapidly into her ear.

Tallstar rose and padded across the clearing to where Sandstorm and Smokefur waited. Ashfoot hovered at her shoulder, and other

cats followed close behind. Sandstorm recognized Barkface, the Windclan medicine cat, and Mudclaw, her lips drawn back in a snarl.

"Well, Smokefur," Tallstar's voice was level, giving nothing away. "Why have you brought Sandstorm here?"

Smokefur dipped his head. "He says he has to talk to you."

"And that means he can just stroll into our camp?" Mudclaw spat. "He's from an enemy Clan!"

Tallstar waved her tail at Mudclaw, a sign for silence, while her eyes looked deep into Sandstorm's. "I'm here," she mewed simply. "Talk."

Sandstorm glanced around her. The crowd was growing larger, as more Windclan cars heard about the intruder in their midst and came out to see what was going on. "What I have to say is not for all ears, Tallstar," he stammered.

For a heartbeat he thought he heard a faint growl in Tallstar's throat, but then the Windclan leader nodded slowly. "Very well. We will go to my den. Ashfoot, you come with us—and you, Smokefur." Turning, she stalked toward the rock at the far end of the clearing, her long tail held high, while the two warriors herded Sandstorm after her.

The Windclan leader's den was sheltered under a deep overhang in the rock, on the side away from the main camp. Tallstar entered and made herself comfortable in a nest of heather, facing Sandstorm. "Well?" she meowed.

Shadows were gathering in the den, and Sandstorm could feel rather than see the shapes of the cats who guarded him. Tension crackled between them, as if they were waiting for the tiniest excuse to attack him. During his journey across the moor he had thought hard about what he would say, but he still didn't know whether he would manage to convince Tallstar that there was a way to avoid Oakstar's attack.

"You know that Oakstar is unhappy about the loss of prey," Sandstorm began.

Instantly the fur on the Windclan leader's shoulders began to bristle. "Windclan did *not* steal prey from Thunderclan!" she snapped.

"We've found scattered remains too," Ashfoot asserted, stepping forward and thrusting his muzzle close to Sandstorm's. "Are you sure *Thunderclan* hasn't been stealing prey from *us*?"

Sandstorm forced himself not to flinch. "No!" he protested. "I don't believe any cats have stolen prey."

"What happened to it, then?" Smokefur asked.

"I think there's a dog living in the forest. We've smelled it, and found its dung."

"A dog!" Smokefur echoed. His eyes narrowed thoughtfully. "What, loose from its Twolegs?"

"I'm certain of it," Sandstorm meowed.

"Could be..." mewed Tallstar. To Sandstorm's relief, the fur on her shoulders was lying flat again. "We've certainly scented dog in our territory recently, but then, they're always up here with their Twolegs." Sounding more confident, she went on: "Yes, it would be a dog killing the rabbits. I'll see that our patrols keep a lookout."

"But you didn't come all this way to tell us that," Ashfoot meowed. "So what's on your mind, Sandstorm?"

Sandstorm took a deep breath. He didn't want to betray Oakstar by telling Tallstar of her plans to attack—but he wanted to suggest to the Windclan leader that future battle could be avoided if she would just talk to Oakstar about the prey theft.

"I can't convince Oakstar about the dog," he explained. "She feels threatened by Windclan, and sooner or later this will all end in battle unless we can do something." He could not tell the Windclan warriors how much sooner the battle would take place if he failed now. "Cats will be injured—killed, even—for nothing."

"Then what do you expect me to do?" Tallstar asked testily. "She's your leader, Sandstorm. This is your problem."

Sandstorm dared to take a couple of steps toward the Windclan leader. "I've come to ask you to hold a meeting with Oakstar. If you could discuss things in private, you might be able to make peace."

"Oakstar wants a meeting?" It was Ashfoot who spoke, sounding disbelieving. "Last time we saw her, she looked as if she would like to claw our throats out."

"This isn't Oakstar's idea—it's mine," Sandstorm confessed.

All three Windclan cats stared at him. Finally it was Smokefur who broke the silence. "Does that mean you're going behind your leader's back?"

"It's for the food of both our Clans," he insisted.

He half expected to be chased out of the camp, but to his relief Tallstar was looking thoughtful. "I'd certainly rather talk than fight," the leader meowed, "but how are we going to arrange it? How willing to listen will she be if she knows that you have talked to us first, without her knowledge?" Not waiting for Sandstorm to reply, she went on: "Perhaps it would be best if I sent a messenger to ask her to meet me at Fourtrees—but can you guarantee the safety of a Windclan cat on Thunderclan territory?"

Sandstorm was silent, which was answer in itself.

Tallstar shrugged. "I'm sorry, Sandstorm. I won't risk one of my warriors. If Oakstar decides that she-s willing to talk, she knows where to find us. Smokefur, you'd better take Sandstorm back to Fourtrees."

"Wait!" Sandstorm protested. An idea had just slid into his mind—or perhaps Starclan had sent it to him. "I know what you can do."

Tallstar's eyes gleamed in the gathering darkness. "What?"

"Do you know the cat Patchpaw? She's a loner who lives on a farm on the edge of your territory, near Highstones. She sheltered us on

the journey to bring you home—remember?"

"I know her," meowed Smokefur. "She's a decent cat, even if she's not a warrior. What about her?"

Sandstorm turned to him eagerly. "She could take the message for you. And Oakstar has given her permission to enter Thunderclan territory—as she used to be a Thunderclan cat."

Tallstar shifted in her nest of heather. "That sounds like it might work. What do you think, Ashfoot?"

A reluctant rumble of agreement came from the deputy.

"Then go!" Sandstorm urged Smokefur, realizing once again how quickly time was running out. "Go now. Tell her to ask Oakstar to meet Tallstar at dawn, at Fourtrees." There was barely enough time for Smokefur to find Patchpaw, and for Patchpaw to carry the message all the way to the Thunderclan camp before Oakstar would be leaving to launch her attack. Sandstorm sent a silent prayer to Starclan that Smokefur would be able to find Patchpaw easily on the Twoleg farm.

Smokefur glanced at his leader, who nodded. At once the gray warrior turned around and disappeared into the darkness outside the den.

Tallstar gazed at Sandstorm with narrowed eyes. "Why do I think there's something you're not telling me?" he mewed. To Sandstorm's relief, he did not press for more answers. "It's time for you to go," he continued. "Ashfoot, escort him off our territory. And Sandstorm—I'll be at Fourtrees at dawn, but that's all I can do. If Oakstar wants peace, she must be there."

"Fourtrees at dawn," Sandstorm repeated, and followed the deputy out.

Sandstorm made good time back to Fourtrees and onto his own territory. He had not eaten since before the Gathering on the previous night; his belly ached with hunger, and he was beginning to feel shaky on his paws, so he forced himself to stop and hunt.

He paused to listen when he reached the stream, and his ears caught the sound of a vole scuffling among the reeds at the water's edge. Lifting his head to taste the air, Sandstorm pinpointed the creature more by scent than sight. He pounced, and his claws sank into his prey. Gulping it down, he felt strength flow back into him, and he headed for his own camp with renewed speed. The moon had risen above the trees by the time he slipped down the ravine, reminding Sandstorm that he had until moonset to choose warriors for Oakstar's planned attack. His optimism was returning. Tallstar had agreed to talk; surely Oakstar would realize that war with Windclan was unnecessary.

He had almost reached the entrance to the clearing when he heard a cat call his name. He turned to see Brindleface following him down the ravine at the head of the evening patrol. Cloudpaw, Brightpaw, and Lionheart were with him.

"Everything quiet?" Sandstorm asked as Brindleface came up to him.

"Quiet as a sleeping kit," the pale gray tabby warrior replied. "No sign of the dog. Maybe its Twolegs found it after all."

"Maybe," Sandstorm meowed. Suddenly he decided to tell Brindleface where he had been. He wanted at least one other warrior to shape the hope that they might not have to go into battle against Windclan. "Actually, Brindleface, I wanted a word with you about that. Can you give me a moment?"

"Of course—if you don't mind my eating while I listen."

Brindleface sent the two apprentices to go take prey for themselves; they bounded over to the pile of fresh-kill and fell into a friendly scuffle over a magpie. Lionheart padded off to the warriors' den with a vole, while Brindleface chose a squirrel for himself and carried it over to a quiet corner by the newly sprouting nettle patch.

Sandstorm followed him. "Brindleface, Oakstar sent for me this morning..." Quietly he told the older warrior the whole story, from Oakstar's obsessive belief that Windclan had been stealing prey and her order to attack, to Sandstorm's decision to ask Windclan for a meeting.

"What?" Brindleface stared at Sandstorm in disbelief. "You went behind Oakstar's back?" His voice failed, and he shook his head in confusion.

Sandstorm immediately felt defensive. "What else could I do?"

"You could have consulted me." The fur on Brindleface's shoulders bristled angrily. "Or some of the other senior warriors. We would have helped you find a solution."

"I'm sorry." Sandstorm's heart was pounding. "I didn't want anyone else to get in trouble. I did what I thought was best." It was because of the warrior code that he had acted alone, knowing that he could not ask any other cat to challenge Oakstar's orders like this.

Brindleface's gaze was intensely thoughtful. "I think we need to tell the other warriors about this," he meowed at last. "They'll need to be ready for Oakstar's attack in case Patchpaw doesn't get here—and even if Oakstar agrees to meet Tallstar, she might want a patrol behind her. I'd bet a moon's worth of dawn patrols that Tallstar guesses something's up. We can't be sure she won't ambush us."

Sandstorm nodded respectfully. "You're right, Brindleface. I trust them, but we should be prepared."

"I'll find some apprentices to guard the camp," Brindleface meowed. "You gather the warriors."

Sandstorm ran across the clearing to the warriors' den. Most of them were already there, curled up in their nests, asleep. Sandstorm prodded Fireheart with a paw to rouse her. She blinked up at him. "What is it?"

"Wake the others, please, Fireheart," Sandstorm meowed. "Brindleface and I have something important to tell everyone."

Fireheart scrambled to her paws. "What do you mean, something important? It's the middle of the night!"

Sandstorm went out again without answering to look for the remaining warriors. He found Whitestorm visiting the king and queen in the nursery and Mousefur coming into camp with his jaws

full of fresh-kill after a late night patrol. He wondered whether he ought to call Cinderpelt, but decided it would be better to explain the situation to him individually.

By the time he returned to the warriors' den the other cats were fully awake. A moment later Brindleface padded under the shelter of the branches and sat down at Sandstorm's side.

"What's all this about?" Darkstripe asked bad-temperedly, flicking moss off one ear. "It had better be good."

Sandstorm felt his stomach churn with nervousness as he wondered how his Clanmates would react when they heard what he had done. Brindleface nodded at him, nudging him to speak.

Taking a deep breath, Sandstorm began. He explained Oakstar's plan to attack, and how he had tried to work out a peaceful solution instead. His Clanmates listened in stunned silence. Sandstorm was acutely conscious of their eyes fixed on him, glowing in the moonlight that filtered through the gaps in the den's roof. In particular he was aware of Fireheart's green gaze, where she sat crouched near the outer branches, but he could not bring himself to look directly at her. He just hoped that the warriors would understand he had done this for the best of reasons, to avoid battle and save lives.

"So Tallstar agreed to meet Oakstar at Fourtrees," he finished. "Patchpaw should be here anytime now to tell her about the meeting."

He braced himself for an outburst from the other warriors, but no cat seemed to know what to say; they merely looked at each other in bewilderment.

Eventually Mousefur asked, "Brindleface, do you agree with what Sandstorm has done?"

Sandstorm waited, his eyes fixed on his paws. He desperately needed Brindleface's support because of the respect he commanded from the other warriors, but he knew that Brindleface did not completely approve of his actions, however well-intentioned.

"I wouldn't have done it." Brindleface spoke with his usual quiet authority. "But I think he's right about not attacking Windclan. I don't believe they have taken any of our prey. There is a dog loose —I've scented it myself."

"So have I, around Snakerocks," confirmed Mousefur.

"At Fourtrees too," meowed Sorreltail. "We can't blame Windclan for that."

"But you're asking us to keep secrets from Oakstar!" Fireheart rose to her paws, and at last Sandstorm had to meet her challenging green stare.

A jolt of dismay ran through Sandstorm. He had not expected Fireheart to be the first cat to object to what he had done. "I'm sorry," he mewed. "I didn't think I had a choice."

"Just what I would expect from a kittypet," growled Darkstripe. "Do you have any idea of what the warrior code means?"

"I know very well what it means," Sandstorm defended himself. "It is because of my loyalty to the Clan that I don't want to fight an unnecessary battle. And I respect Starclan as much as any cat. I don't believe it's their will that we attack tonight."

Darkstripe twitched her ears scornfully, but she said no more. Sandstorm glanced around, wondering whether he was winning the support of his warriors. When Oakstar gave up her last life and went to join Starclan, he realized uncomfortably, he might have to lead this Clan, and if he could not command their loyalty and respect, the task would be impossible.

"This is what's important," he went on desperately. "Windclan hasn't done anything wrong. And we have enough to do, rebuilding the camp and keeping up the patrols, without fighting an unnecessary, dangerous battle. How will we keep ourselves fed and prepare for leaf-bare if we have warriors injured or even killed?"

"He's right." Whitestorm spoke up, and the others turned to look at her. "Our children would be in the battle," she went on quietly. "We

don't want them hurt for nothing."

Lionheart added her agreement, but the rest of the warriors were still murmuring among themselves. Again he was aware of Fireheart, and the distress in her green eyes. He could understand how torn she must feel now, between her loyalty to Oakstar and her commitment to him. Right now Sandstorm wanted nothing more than to press himself against her flank and forget all this in the sweet scent of her fur, but he had to go on standing in front of his warriors, waiting for their verdict on whether they would support him or not.

"So what do you want us to do?" Longtail meowed at last.

"I'll need a party of warriors ready to go with Oakstar to Fourtrees," Sandstorm replied. "If Patchpaw doesn't come, or if Oakstar doesn't agree to talk, then she'll lead us into battle. And if that happens..." His voice failed; he swallowed.

"Yes, what then?" Fireheart demanded. "Do you want us to disobey Oakstar's direct orders? Turn around and run away? Ferncloud, tell Sandstorm what a mouse-brained idea that is!"

Ferncloud's ears pricked in surprise. Sandstorm knew very well that part of the flecked pale gray warrior's antagonism toward him was because Fireheart so clearly preferred Sandstorm now. He braced himself for more criticism, but Ferncloud meowed hesitantly, "I don't know, Fireheart. Sandstorm's right that it's a bad time for a battle, and besides, no cat can seriously believe that Windclan is stealing our prey. If Oakstar thinks so, then... well..." He broke off, scuffling his paws in confusion.

"It's understandable that Oakstar can't trust Windclan," Sandstorm mewed, instinctively defending his leader. "Not since they stopped her going to Highstones. And we've never known dogs loose in the forest before. But there is no evidence at all that Windclan took those rabbits, and plenty of evidence that a dog did."

"So what do you suggest if it comes to battle, Sandstorm?" asked Mousefur. "Come back to the camp when Oakstar gives the order to attack?"

"No," Sandstorm replied. "Tallstar seemed willing to meet Oakstar in peace, and if we're lucky he'll have only one or two warriors with him. It won't come to a fight."

"That's a pretty big *if*," mewed Mousefur with a skeptical flick of his tail. "What if Windclan assumes the same thing, and sets an ambush for us? We'd be crow-food." Sandstorm winced as he voiced Brindleface's own doubts about whether they could trust Tallstar.

"I'm not going," Longtail announced loudly. "Let Windclan tear us apart? I'm not mouse-brained!"

Ferncloud, who was sitting next to her, turned his head and gave her a scorching look of contempt. "No, *you're* a coward," he meowed.

"I'm not!" Longtail's protest was shrill. "I'm a loyal Thunderclan cat!"

"Fine, Longtail," Sandstorm broke in. "We don't need every warrior to go. You can stay and guard the camp. And that goes for the rest of you," he added. "If you don't want to be part of this, stay here." He waited tensely for his warriors' response, looking around at their troubled faces in the dim light of the den.

"I'll go," meowed Brindleface at last. "I think we can trust Tallstar not to fight, if there is an alternative."

Sandstorm shot him a grateful glance as the other warriors hesitated, murmuring to each other or shifting uncomfortably among the mossy bedding.

"I'll go too." Sorreltail sounded nervous to be the first to speak among so many older warriors.

"So will I," mewed Ferncloud. His tail lashed once in Sandstorm's direction. "But if Windclan attacks, I'll fight. I'm not going to be clawed apart for any cat."

The rest of the warriors joined in. To Sandstorm's surprise, Darkstripe agreed to go, while Mousefur refused.

"I'm sorry, Sandstorm," he meowed. "I think you're talking sense, but

that's not the point. The warrior code isn't something you stick to just when you feel like it. I don't think I could disobey my leader if she ordered me to attack."

"Well, I *will* go," Whitestorm asserted. "I don't want to see my kits torn to pieces in a battle we don't have to fight."

"I'll go too," meowed Lionheart. Her gaze swept over the warriors around her as she added, "We don't raise kits to fight in unjust battles."

At last Sandstorm had to face Fireheart, who so far had said nothing. He could not imagine what he would do if she refused to support him. "Fireheart?" he mewed hesitantly.

Fireheart crouched with her head down, not meeting his eyes. "I'll go along with you, Sandstorm," she muttered. "I know you're right about the dogs—but I still hate lying to Oakstar."

Sandstorm moved to her side and gave her ear a quick lick, wanting to thank her, but she jerked her head away without looking at him.

"What about the apprentices?" Darkstripe asked. "Do you want them to come with us? Dustpaw's too young to get involved."

"I agree," Ferncloud mewed swiftly.

For all his tension Sandstorm had to suppress a purr of amusement to hear Ferncloud betraying the soft spot he felt for Darkstripe's apprentice.

"I'd prefer to keep Cloudpaw out of it," meowed Brindleface.

"But won't Oakstar think there's something odd if we don't take any apprentices with us?" asked Sorreltail.

"That's a good point." Sandstorm nodded at the young warrior. "Okay, we'll take Swiftpaw and Brightpaw. But only if Oakstar wants to take that many cats with her, and we'll tell them what's going on *after* we leave. The news will be all around the camp otherwise."

Sandstorm realized to his surprise that he had more warriors on his side than he needed. If Patchpaw made it to the camp on time and Oakstar agreed to go and talk to Tallstar, it would seem odd if a whole fighting patrol of warriors offered to go with her. Besides, he didn't want to leave the camp vulnerable to attack, especially now. "Why don't Lionheart and Sorreltail stay to help guard the camp?" he suggested. "I am grateful for your support, but you may be needed here."

Sorreltail and Lionheart exchanged a glance and then nodded.

"Now the rest of you had better get some sleep," he continued. "We leave at moonset."

He watched the warriors settle down in their bedding, but he did not join them. He knew he had no chance of sleeping, and he wanted to tell Cinderpelt what was going on before he heard it from any other cat. If it weren't for his faith in Spottedleaf, he would have started to doubt long ago that he could stop this battle. There seemed to be so much that could go wrong: Patchpaw might not bring the message in time, Oakstar might refuse to talk to Tallstar, Windclan might ambush them at Fourtrees...

Giving himself a shake, Sandstorm emerged into the clearing. He glanced around for any sign of Patchpaw, but the camp lay silent in the moonlight. A pair of eyes gleamed from the entrance to the gorse tunnel, and as Sandstorm padded closer he made out the pale shape of Ashpaw, on guard.

"Do you know who Patchpaw is?" he asked, and when the apprentice nodded, he went on: "She hasn't been here tonight, has she?"

Looking puzzled, Ashpaw shook her head.

"If she comes," Sandstorm instructed her, "let her in, and take her straight to Oakstar, okay?"

"Okay, Sandstorm." Ashpaw was clearly bursting with curiosity, but she didn't ask any questions.

Sandstorm nodded to her and went off to find Cinderpelt. Padding up to the medicine cat's den, he saw him sitting outside, deep in conversation with Mousefur.

Both cats looked around at his approach.

"Sandstorm?" Cinderpelt meowed, rising slowly to his paws. "What's all this Mousefur is telling me? Why wasn't I invited to the meeting?" His blue eyes blazed with annoyance.

"It was just for the warriors," Sandstorm replied, though the explanation sounded feeble even to him.

"Oh, right," mewed Cinderpelt dryly, "You thought I wouldn't be interested in keeping secrets from Oakstar?"

"It's not like that!" Sandstorm protested. "I was coming to tell you now. Mousefur," he added, giving the tom a hostile glance, "aren't you supposed to be resting?"

Mousefur returned his glare, then spun around and vanished into the darkness.

"Well?" prompted Cinderpelt.

"It sounds as if Mousefur has told you already. I don't like this situation any more than you, but what choice is there? Do you really think that Starclan wants war in the forest—especially an unjust war?"

"Starclan has shown me nothing about any battles," Cinderpelt admitted. "And I don't want bloodshed, but is this the only way to stop it?"

"If you can think of a better idea, tell me."

Cinderpelt shook his head. Moonlight shone on his gray fur, giving him a ghostly appearance, as if he were already halfway into the world of Starclan. "Whatever you do, Sandstorm, be careful of Oakstar. Be gentle with her. She was a great leader—and she might be again."

Sandstorm wanted so much to believe the medicine cat. But each day Oakstar seemed to slide further into confusion. The wise mentor he had respected when he first came to Thunderclan seemed very far away.

"I'll do my best," he promised. "I don't *want* to deceive her. But that's why I've organized this meeting with Tallstar. I want her to realize we don't have to fight. And she won't listen to me." Tensely, he added, "Do you think I'm wrong?"

"It's not for me to say." Cinderpelt met his gaze steadily. "This is your decision, Sandstorm. No cat can make it for you."

Chapter 14

Author's Note: Hey all! Sorry this chapter took so long. It is finals week and I have 3 finals in 2 weeks. I've been prepping hard to make sure my grades stay the same. Another piece of news, my cover artist has written his own story! It is called "Guilt" and there is an english and spanish version! Go check it out! His username is 4l3h_dr34m!

When Sandstorm returned to the clearing, there was still no sign of Patchpaw. His belly churned. The moon was high in the sky. Before long, Oakstar would lead her warriors into battle against Windclan, and all hope of a peaceful solution would be lost.

Where was Patchpaw? Perhaps Smokefur hadn't been able to find her. Or perhaps she couldn't come—or she was on her way but would arrive too late. Sandstorm wanted to dash out into the forest and look for her, but he knew that would serve no purpose.

Then he saw a flicker of movement at the entrance to the camp, and heard a mewed challenge from Ashpaw. Another cat answered, and Sandstorm shivered with relief as he recognized Patchpaw's voice. Springing forward, he bounded across the clearing.

"Okay, Ashpaw," he meowed to the apprentice. "I'll look after Patchpaw—you stay on guard." He touched noses with the sleek cat who emerged from the gorse tunnel. "It's good to see you, Patchpaw. How are you?"

Even as he asked the question he could see that the former apprentice was looking well. Her black and white pelt shone in the moonlight and her strong muscles rippled beneath the fur.

"I'm fine," Patchpaw replied. She looked around the clearing, her blue eyes very wide. "It seems strange to be here again, Sandstorm.

I'm sorry to hear you're having with Windclan. Smokefur told me everything, and he swore they haven't been stealing prey."

"Try convincing Oakstar of that," Sandstorm meowed grimly. "Look, I hate to rush you—I know you must have run like the wind to get here so fast—but we don't have much time. Follow me."

He led the way to Oakstar's den. The Thunderclan leader was curled in her nest, but when Sandstorm looked closely at her he could see a gleam of moonlight reflected from her narrowed eyes. She was not asleep.

"What's the matter, Sandstorm?" she asked, sounding annoyed. "It's not yet time to go yet. And who's that with you?"

"It's Patchpaw, Oakstar," the loner meowed, stepping forward. "I've come with a message from Windclan."

"*Windclan!*" Oakstar sprang to her paws. "What does that Clan of thieves want to say to me?"

To Patchpaw's credit, she didn't flinch, though Sandstorm knew she must remember the days when she was a Clan apprentice and Oakstar's anger was something to be feared. "Tallstar wants to meet with you, to discuss the loss of prey," she told her.

"*Does* she?" Briefly Oakstar glared at her deputy, her eyes blazing with fire. For a heartbeat Sandstorm was sure she had guessed what he had done. There was an ominous pause.

"Oakstar, surely it would be better to talk than fight?" he ventured.

"Don't tell me what to do," Oakstar snapped. Her tail tip twitched irritably. "Get out of here. Patchpaw and I will discuss this together."

Sandstorm had no choice but to leave the den. He hovered around outside, listening to the murmur of voices but unable to make out what Oakstar and Patchpaw were saying.

After a while Brindleface emerged from the warriors' den and padded over to join him. "The moon's going down," the pale gray

tabby warrior meowed. "Oakstar will want to leave soon. Is Patchpaw here yet?"

"Yes, she is," mewed Sandstorm. "But I don't know whether—"

He broke off at a movement from inside the den. A heartbeat later, Oakstar stalked out with Patchpaw behind her. She paced forward until she reached Sandstorm, her tail lashing. "Gather a patrol," she ordered. "We go to Fourtrees."

"Does that mean you are going to talk with Tallstar?" Sandstorm asked bravely.

His leader's tail lashed again. "I will talk," she meowed. "But if there is no agreement, then we will fight."

The night was still dark when Oakstar led her warriors into the hollow where the four great oaks stood. Sandstorm padded at her shoulder, the smallest of rustles told him that the other cats were following. His heart lurched as an owl hooted in the distance. He had barely had a chance to murmur his thanks to Patchpaw for bringing Tallstar's message before the black and white cat had slipped away from the Thunderclan warriors. She would follow a different route back to her farmland home, keeping well clear of Fourtrees.

Oakstar paused at the top of the slope. As the other warriors caught up with her, starlight cast a faint sheen on their fur, touching their pricked ears and reflecting from their wide eyes. Sandstorm could almost taste their anticipation.

When he looked across the border into Windclan territory, he thought at first that the sweep of moorland was empty, stretching up to the night sky. Wind swept across it and rustled the oak trees in the hollow behind him. Then he caught sight of movement up ahead, and he realized that a line of cats was standing there, with Tallstar at their center. His stomach clenched as Sandstorm realized that Tallstar, too, had brought her warriors with her.

"What's that?" Oakstar hissed, turning to glare into her eyes. "So many Windclan cats? I thought I was coming here to talk." Her eyes

glared furiously at Sandstorm, some sharpened instinct flooding her expression with understanding. "This looks more like an ambush than a meeting of leaders."

At a flick of her tail, the Thunderclan warriors moved up in purposeful silence to form a tight line on either side of their leader, facing the Windclan cats. Sandstorm felt the air crackle with tension, and he realized that it would be all too easy for fighting to break out, even if Windclan did not attack first. Would Tallstar keep her word, and try to talk to Oakstar rather than fight?

"Tallstar?" Oakstar meowed coldly. "What have you to say to me?"

Waiting for the Windclan leader's response, Sandstorm nervously sheathed and unsheathed his claws. He did not know if the line would hold. If just one cat moved forward, battle could engulf them all. He saw Ferncloud exchange a tense glance with Whitestorm, as if both cats were thinking the same as he was. Next to him, Fireheart kept her gaze fixed on the Windclan cats, her ears flat to her head. Swiftpaw stared nervously at her leader, but she held her place in the line. Brightpaw, on Sandstorm's other side, had dropped into the hunter's crouch, his rump wriggling as if he were about to spring.

"Keep *still*!" Sandstorm hissed.

A few fox-lengths away, Tallstar stood a pace or two ahead of her own warriors. As the first pale light of dawn crept into the sky, Sandstorm could make her out more clearly. Her black and white fur was fluffed up, and her tail held erect. Behind her, Sandstorm spotted Smokefur and Cloudrunner, and the young apprentice Gorsepaw. *I don't want to fight these cats,* he thought. He waited, feeling his heart pound like that of a trapped bird.

"No cat is to move," Tallstar ordered her warriors at last, her voice carrying easily in the still air.

"You must be mad!" That was Mudclaw, padding to Tallstar's side. "That's a fighting force she's brought with her. We've got to attack!"

"No." Tallstar took another pace forward, flicking her tail to

summon Ashfoot, her deputy, to her side. Looking directly at Oakstar, she dipped her head. "No battle will be fought here today. I said that I would come here to talk, and that's what I intend to do."

Oakstar did not respond. She crouched on the ground, her fur bristling and her teeth bared in a snarl of defiance. Sandstorm was suddenly afraid that she had changed her mind, and wondered what would happen if she launched herself at the Windclan leader. He sent up a fervent prayer to Starclan that she would not order her warriors to attack.

Meanwhile, Smokefur came up to Mudclaw and nudged her roughly back into line. For a moment that seemed to Sandstorm to last several moons, the two lines of cats faced each other, their fur blowing in the wind, their eyes gleaming with a tension that teetered on the brink of breaking out into squalling, biting rage.

"Oakstar," Tallstar spoke again. "Will you come here to me, between our warriors? Bring your deputy with you, an let us see if we can make peace."

"Peace?" Oakstar spat. "How can I make peace with prey stealers and rogues?"

Yowls of protest rose from the Windclan cats. Mudclaw sprang forward, but Smokefur leaped after her and bowled her over, holding her writhing on the turf. Sandstorm saw Darkstripe lash her tail to and fro; if Mudclaw attacked, Darkstripe would meet her, and all hope of peace would be over.

"Do as Tallstar says," Sandstorm mewed desperately to Oakstar. "That's why we're here. Windclan has suffered from stolen prey, just like Thunderclan."

Oakstar rounded on him, a look of venomous hatred blazing in her amber eyes. "It seems we have no choice," she hissed at him. "But there'll be a reckoning for this, Sandstorm. You can be sure of that."

Stiff-legged, her fur bristling, she paced forward until she stood in front of Tallstar, right on the border of Windclan territory. Sandstorm followed, murmuring to Fireheart, "Keep an eye on

Darkstripe," as he left the line of warriors.

Tallstar watched Oakstar coolly as she approached. The Windclan leader had never forgiven her, Sandstorm knew, for sheltering her old enemy Brokentail, but she had the wisdom not to let her grudge influence her now. "Oakstar," she meowed, "I swear by Starclan that Windclan has not hunted on your territory."

"Starclan!" Oakstar sneered. "What's the worth of an oath by Starclan?"

The black and white she-cat looked taken aback, her gaze flickering to Sandstorm as if she were looking for an explanation. "Then I will swear it by anything you hold sacred," she went on. "By our kits, by our hopes for our Clans, by our honors as leaders. Windclan did not do what you accuse us of."

For the first time her words seemed to reach Oakstar. Sandstorm saw her fur begin to lie flat. "How can I believe you?" she rasped.

"We have lost prey too," Tallstar told her. "It may be dogs, or rogues. It is not cats from Windclan."

"So you say," meowed Oakstar. She sounded uncertain now. Sandstorm thought that perhaps Tallstar was beginning to convince her, but she did not know how to back down without losing dignity.

"Oakstar," Sandstorm mewed urgently, "a noble leader doesn't take her warriors into battle without need. If there's the least doubt that —"

"Do you think you know more than I do about how to lead a Clan?" Oakstar interrupted. Her fur had bristled again, but this time it was Sandstorm who was the target of her anger. He caught a glimpse of the old, formidable Thunderclan leader, and it was all he could do not to flinch from her.

"Young cats think they know everything." Tallstar meowed. There was a hint of sympathetic humor in her voice, and Sandstorm felt a flash of gratitude toward the Windclan leader for her sensitivity to Oakstar's fears. "But sometimes we have to listen to them. There is

no need for this battle."

Oakstar's ears twitched irritably. "Very well," she mewed reluctantly. "I accept your word—for now. But if my patrols scent Windclan one tail-length over our border..." She whipped around and called to the Thunderclan cats. "Back to camp!" she ordered, leaping ahead of them.

As Sandstorm turned to follow her, Tallstar dipped her head to him. "Thank you, Sandstorm. You did well, and my Clan honors your courage in averting this battle—but I don't envy you now."

Sandstorm shrugged, and followed the rest of his Clan. Just before he plunged into the follow at Fourtrees, he glanced over his shoulder to see the Windclan cats racing back across the open moor toward their camp. The turf gleamed pale in the soft dawn light, unstained by the blood of any cat.

"Thank you, Spottedleaf," Sandstorm murmured as he turned away.

Oakstar led her warriors back to camp in tense silence. At the entrance to the clearing, Sandstorm bounded ahead to talk to Mousefur, who was sitting outside the warriors' den.

"Any problems?" he asked.

Mousefur shook his head. "No trouble at all," he reported. "Lionheart has taken out the dawn patrol with Sorreltail and a couple of the apprentices." Looking him over, he added, "You don't seem to be missing any fur. I suppose the peace talk worked."

"Yes, it did. Thanks for taking care of things here, Mousefur."

Mousefur dipped his head. "I'm going to get some sleep," he meowed. "You'll need to send some cats out to hunt. There's hardly any fresh-kill left."

"I'll lead a hunting party," Sandstorm promised.

"No, you won't." Oakstar came padding up behind him. Her eyes were chips of amber ice. "I want to see you in my den, Sandstorm. Now." She stalked across the clearing without looking back to see if

he was following.

Sandstorm's fur prickled with dread. He had expected some sort of recrimination from his leader, but that didn't make it any easier now that it was about to happen.

"I'll see to the hunting party," Brindleface meowed, giving him a sympathetic look as he came up with Fireheart and Ferncloud.

Sandstorm nodded his thanks and headed toward Oakstar's den. By the time he reached it, his leader was seated on her bedding with her paws tucked under her. The tip of her tail twitched back and forth.

"Sandstorm." Her voice was quiet; Sandstorm would have been less afraid if she had yowled at him. "Tallstar couldn't have picked a more convenient time to talk to me about the prey theft than if Starclan had told her themselves. That was your doing, wasn't it? You're the only cat who knew that I was planning to attack Windclan. Only you could have betrayed us."

She sounded as if her mind was clearer than it had been for some time, as if the instinct that had sharpened her senses on the moor had settled into hard certainty. She was behaving like the noble leader he had once reported, giving Sandstorm an even more agonizing sense of what they had lost. He still believed that he had not betrayed his Clan, but he had given away the advantage of surprise, because Tallstar had been wise enough to realize that battle must be close. Would Oakstar send him into exile? Sandstorm shivered at the thought of being forced to live as a rogue, stealing prey and with no Clan to call his own.

He came to stand in front of Oakstar and dipped his head. "I thought it was the right thing to do," he meowed quietly. "Neither of the Clans needed to fight this battle."

"I trusted you, Sandstorm," Oakstar rasped. "You, out of all my warriors."

Sandstorm forced himself to meet her flinty gaze. "I did it for the good of the Clan, Oakstar. And I didn't tell him about the attack. I

only asked him to try making peace. I thought—"

"*Silence!*" Oakstar hissed, lashing her tail. "That is no excuse. And why should I care if the whole Clan had been slaughtered? Why should I care what happens to traitors?"

A wild light was growing in her eyes again, and Sandstorm realized that the moment's clarity had gone.

"If only I'd kept my kits!" she whispered. "Blackclaw and Stonefur are noble cats. Far nobler that any of this ragtag bunch in Thunderclan. My children would never have betrayed me."

"Oakstar..." Sandstorm tried to interrupt, but she ignored him.

"I gave them up to become deputy, and now Starclan is punishing me. Oh, Starclan are clever, Sandstorm! They knew the cruelest way to break me. They made me leader and then let my cats betray me! What is it worth, now, to be leader of Thunderclan? Nothing! It's all empty, all..." Her paws worked furiously among the moss. Her eyes were glazed, staring at nothing, and her mouth gaped in a soundless wail.

Sandstorm shuddered in dismay. "I'll fetch Cinderpelt," he meowed.

"Stay... where... you... are." Each word was rasped out separately. "I need to punish you, Sandstorm. Tell me a good punishment for a traitor."

Nearly sick with fear and shock, Sandstorm forced himself to reply. "I don't know, Oakstar."

"But I do." Now her voice was a low purr, with a strange note of amusement in it. Her gaze locked with Sandstorm's. "I know the best punishment of all. I'll do nothing. I'll let you be deputy still, and leader after me. Oh, that should please Starclan—a traitor leading a Clan of traitors! May they give you joy of it, Sandstorm. Now get out of my sight!"

The last words were spat out. Sandstorm back away from her, into the clearing. He felt as if he had been in a battle after all. Oakstar's despair pierced him like sharpened claws. But he couldn't help

feeling that Oakstar had let him down too, by not even trying to understand his motives; she had labeled him a traitor without even considering what would have happened if they had fought Windclan.

Head down, Sandstorm padded across the clearing, not even aware that another cat had approached him until he heard Fireheart's voice.

"What happened, Sandstorm? Has she sent you away?"

Sandstorm looked up, Fireheart's green eyes were anxious, though she did not move close enough to comfort him with her touch.

"No," he replied. "She didn't do anything."

"Then that's all right." Fireheart sounded as if she were forcing optimism into her voice. "Why are you looking like that?"

"She's... ill." Sandstorm couldn't begin to describe what he had just witnessed in Oakstar's den. "I'm going to get Cinderpelt to see her. Then maybe we can eat together."

"No, I... I said I'd go hunting with Brightpaw and Whitestorm." Fireheart scuffled her front paws, not looking at him. "Don't worry about Oakstar, Sandstorm. She'll be all right."

"I don't know." Sandstorm couldn't repress a shiver. "I thought I could make her understand, but she thinks I betrayed her."

Fireheart said nothing. Sandstorm saw her give him a quick glance and then looked away. There was longing in her eyes, but it was mingled with uneasiness, and he remembered how she had resented deceiving Oakstar.

Does Fireheart think I'm a traitor too? he thought desperately.

After Sandstorm had sent Cinderpelt to Oakstar, he headed for the warriors' den. He felt as if his legs could hardly hold him up, and he could think of nothing except sinking into the soft darkness of sleep. His heart sank when he saw Longtail stalking across the clearing toward him.

"I want a word with you, Sandstorm," she growled.

Sandstorm sat down. "What is it?"

"You ordered *my* apprentice to go with you this morning."

"Yes, and I told you why."

"She didn't like it, but she did her duty," Longtail meowed harshly.

That was true, Sandstorm reflected. He had admired the apprentice's courage in a tough situation, but he wasn't sure why Longtail was making such a fuss now.

"I think it's time she was made a warrior," Longtail went on. "In fact, Sandstorm, she should have been a warrior long ago."

"Yes, I know," Sandstorm replied. "You're right, Longtail, she should."

Longtail looked taken aback at his ready agreement. "So what are you going to do about it?" she blustered.

"Right now, nothing," Sandstorm meowed. "Don't flatten your ears at me, Longtail. Just think, will you? Oakstar is distressed at the moment. She didn't like what happened this morning, and she won't want to think about promoting apprentices. No, wait." He flicked his tail to silence Longtail as the pale warrior opened his mouth to protest. "Leave it with me. Sooner or later Oakstar has to realize that what happened was for the best. Then I'll talk to her about making Swiftpaw a warrior, I promise."

Longtail sniffed. Sandstorm could see she wasn't happy, but she couldn't think of any reason to object. "All right," the pale tabby warrior mewed. "But it had better be soon."

She stalked off again, leaving Sandstorm to head for his nest. As he curled into the soft moss, shutting his eyes tight against the early morning light, he couldn't help worrying about the four older apprentices. Brightpaw, Cloudpaw, and Blossompaw all deserved to be warriors as well as Swiftpaw. And the Clan desperately needed them to take on full warrior duties. But in her present mood,

convinced that she was surrounded by traitors, Oakstar would never agree to give them warrior status.

Sandstorm's dreams were dark and confused, and he woke to find that a cat was nudging him. A voice meowed, "Wake up, Sandstorm!"

Blinking, he focused his eyes on Cinderpelt's face. His gray fur was ruffled and his eyes wide with anxiety; Sandstorm was awake in a heartbeat.

"What's the matter?"

"It's Oakstar," Cinderpelt replied. "I can't find her anywhere!"

Chapter 15

Sandstorm sprang to his paws. "Tell me what happened."

"When I saw her earlier this morning, I took her poppy seeds to calm her down," Cinderpelt explained. "But when I went to her den just now, she wasn't there, and she hadn't eaten the poppy seeds. I tried the elders' den and the nursery, but she isn't there either. She isn't anywhere in camp, Sandstorm."

"Did anyone see her leave?"

"I haven't asked yet. I came to tell you first."

"Then I'll get the apprentices to search, and find out if—"

"Oakstar's not a kit, you know." The interruption came from Brindleface, who had padded into the warriors' den in time to hear Cinderpelt's news. "She might have gone on patrol. For all you know, other cats are with her." He spoke calmly as he bared his teeth in a yawn and settled into his nest.

Sandstorm nodded uncertainly. What Brindleface said was sensible, but he would have liked to be sure. After the state Oakstar had been in that morning, she could be anywhere in the forest. She might even have gone to Riverclan in search of her kits.

"There's probably no need to worry," Sandstorm reassured Cinderpelt, hoping he sounded more confident than he felt. "But we'll look anyway, and find out if any cat has seen her."

Leaving the den, he spotted Dustpaw and Ashpaw sharing tongues near the blackened remains of the tree stump outside the apprentices' den. Quickly Sandstorm explained that he had a message for Oakstar, but he wasn't sure where she was. The two apprentices dashed off willingly to look for her.

"You go and ask if any cat has seen her," he suggested to Cinderpelt, who had followed him out of the den. "I'll go up the ravine and see if I can pick up her scent. I might be able to track her."

Privately he didn't have much hope. While he had slept, clouds had covered the sky and a thin rain was drizzling down. It was not good weather for following scent. Before he could leave, Sandstorm noticed that Fireheart was just returning to camp, along with Brightpaw and Whitestorm. All three of them carried fresh-kill, which they went over to drop on the pile.

Sandstorm raced up to them, with Cinderpelt limping behind. "Fireheart," he meowed, "have you seen Oakstar?"

Fireheart swiped her tongue around her mouth to remove the prey juices. "No. Why?"

"She isn't here," mewed Cinderpelt.

Fireheart's eyes widened. "Are you surprised? After what happened this morning? SHe must feel like she's losing control of her Clan."

That was so close to the truth that Sandstorm didn't know how to answer.

"We're going out again," meowed Brightpaw. "We'll keep a lookout for her."

"Okay, thanks." Sandstorm blinked gratefully at his apprentice.

The young white and ginger tom raced off again, with the two warriors following more slowly. Whitestorm paused to meow, "I'm sure she'll be fine, Sandstorm," as she left, but Fireheart didn't look back.

Sandstorm's problems were about to overwhelm him, but then he felt Cinderpelt's breath soft against his ear. "Don't worry, Sandstorm," he murmured. "Fireheart's still your friend. You need to accept that she doesn't always see things the way you do."

"You don't either." Sandstorm sighed.

Cinderpelt let out an affectionate purr. "I'm still your friend too," he told him. "And I know you've done what you believe to be right. Now, let's see what we can do to find Oakstar."

By the time the sun set, Oakstar was still missing. Sandstorm had tracked her as far as the top of the ravine, but after that, with the rain coming down more heavily, the scent was lost among the tang of charred branches and the musty smell of fallen leaves.

Too anxious to sleep, Sandstorm put himself on watch. The night was far gone, and the moon was setting when he spotted movement by the camp entrance. The last rays of moonlight picked out a reddish-brown coat as Oakstar limped back into the camp. Her fur was soaked, plastered to her body, and her head was low. She looked old, exhausted, defeated.

Sandstorm hurried across to her. "Oakstar, where have you been?"

The Clan leader raised her head and looked at him. A jolt ran through Sandstorm; her eyes, faintly glowing in the dim light, were clear and bright in spite of her exhaustion. "You sound like a queen scolding her kit," she rasped, an edge of humor in her voice. She jerked her head in the direction of her den. "Come with me."

Sandstorm obeyed, pausing only to snatch a vole from the pile of fresh-kill. Oakstar needed to eat, wherever she had been. When he reached Oakstar's den, his leader was seated in her mossy nest, washing herself with long, careful strokes. Sandstorm would have liked to sit beside her and share tongues with her, but after their last encounter he did not dare. Instead he dropped the vole in front of her and respectfully dipped his head. "What happened, Oakstar?" he asked.

Oakstar stretched her neck to sniff the vole, half turned away from it, and then began to gulp it down as if she had suddenly realized how hungry she was. She did not answer until she had finished it.

"I went to speak with Starclan," she announced, flicking the last traces of vole from her whiskers.

Sandstorm stared. "To Highstones? On your own?"

"Of course. Which of this pack of traitors could I ask to escort me?"

Sandstorm swallowed. Gently he meowed, "Your Clan is loyal, Oakstar. All of us."

Oakstar shook her head stubbornly. "I went to Highstones, and I spoke with Starclan."

"But why?" Sandstorm was feeling more and more confused. "I thought you no longer wanted to share tongues with Starclan."

The old cat drew herself up. "I do not. I went to challenge them. I wanted to ask how they could justify what they have done to me, when I have served them all my life and tried to do their will. And to demand an explanation for the things that are happening in the forest."

Sandstorm gazed at her in disbelief, amazed that his leader had dared to challenge the spirits of their warrior ancestors.

"I lay beside the Moonstone and Starclan came to me," Oakstar went on. "They did not justify themselves—how could they? There is *no* justification for what they have done to me. But they told me something..."

Sandstorm leaned closer. "What?"

"They said that there is evil loose in the forest. They spoke of a 'pack.' They told me that it will bring more death and destruction than the forest has ever seen before."

"What did they mean?" Sandstorm whispered. Surely there had been enough death and destruction already, with the fire and the floods?

Oakstar lowered her head. "I don't know."

"But we *must* find out!" Sandstorm exclaimed, his mind whirling. "Perhaps they mean the dog—but a dog couldn't do damage on that scale. And what about 'pack'? Maybe... yes, maybe they were talking about Shadowclan. You know how Goldenstar vowed to take revenge on us. Maybe he's planning an attack. Or Leopardstar," he added, still trying to cling to his hope that Goldenstar had lost

interest in harming his old Clan.

Oakstar shrugged. "Maybe."

Sandstorm narrowed his eyes. He couldn't understand why she didn't want to work out the meaning of what Starclan had told her and make plans to stop the attack if it came."We have to do something," he insisted. "We could set a watch on the borders, and we should increase the patrols." He wasn't sure how he was going to with so few warriors. "We need to make sure there's always a guard on the camp when..."

His voice trailed off as he realized that Oakstar wasn't listening. She crouched motionless, her eyes fixed on her paws. "Oakstar?"

The Thunderclan leader looked up at him, her eyes bottomless pools of despair. "What is the point?" she rasped. "Starclan has decreed that death will come. A dark force walks this forest, and even Starclan themselves cannot control it. Or *will* not. There is nothing we can do."

A shudder went through Sandstorm. Was Oakstar right that Starclan was not powerful enough to avert the doom that was coming? For a few heartbeats he almost shared his leader's despair.

Then he raised his head. He felt as though he were clawing his way up from the depths of black water. "No," he growled. "I won't believe that. There is always something that a cat can do, as long as he has courage and loyalty."

"Courage? Loyalty? In Thunderclan?"

"Yes, Oakstar." Sandstorm tried to put all the force of his belief into his reply. "No cat but Goldenstar has ever wanted to betray you."

Oakstar held his gaze for a moment before looking away. Her tail flicked wearily. "Do what you want, Sandstorm. It won't make any difference. Nothing will. Now leave me."

Sandstorm murmured a farewell. Backing away, he noticed the poppy seeds Cinderpelt had left earlier, still lying neatly on a leaf. He nodded toward them. "Eat your poppy seeds, Oakstar," he

mewed. "You need to rest. Tomorrow everything will look better."

He took the leaf between his teeth and carefully moved it into Oakstar's reach. Oakstar gave a disdainful sniff, but as Sandstorm left the den he glanced back to see her bend over and lick up the seeds.

Outside, he gave his pelt a shake, trying to get rid of the creeping horror he had felt as Oakstar revealed the message of Starclan. His paws carried him instinctively in the direction of Cinderpelt's den. He would have to tell the medicine cat that Oakstar was back, and he wanted to discuss what his leader had told him.

Only then did he remember that more than a moon ago, Cinderpelt had told him of a dream in which he heard the words *pack, pack* and *kill, kill.*

Chapter 16

Cinderpelt could tell Sandstorm nothing more, nor suggest what the evil in the forest might be.

"Starclan wouldn't repeat the warning if it weren't important," he meowed, his troubled blue gaze resting on Sandstorm. "All we can do is keep watch."

"At least Oakstar is back safely." Sandstorm tried to encourage him, but it was a poor effort. Both cats were aware of the shapeless, voiceless threat hanging over the Clan they loved.

In the days that followed, Sandstorm did his best to set up a system of patrols that would give the Clan ample warning if Shadowclan or Riverclan decided to attack. There were barely enough warriors for the regular patrols and sentry duties, and Sandstorm felt his fur grow thin with worry as the season moved on. The rain gave way to crisp, dry weather, but there was a thin rime of frost on the ground each morning and the remaining leaves dropped steadily from the trees. The brief recovery of the forest was over, and prey became scarce again.

One morning, about a half moon after the confrontation with Windclan, Sandstorm was about to lead out the dawn patrol with Sorreltail and Brightpaw when Oakstar came padding from her den. "I'll lead the patrol this morning," she meowed, and went to wait by the entrance to the camp.

"Oakstar leading a patrol?" muttered Brightpaw. "That ought to go well. Watch out for flying hedgehogs!"

Sandstorm aimed a cuff at the side of his head, but he couldn't help feeling as surprised as his apprentice that Oakstar should start taking up Clan duties again. "Show some respect," he ordered. "She's your leader, and she's been ill."

Brightpaw grunted. Sandstorm was about to join his leader when an

idea struck him. "Listen, Brightpaw, you want to be a warrior, don't you?" The white and ginger cat nodded eagerly. "Well, then, this is your chance to impress Oakstar. We'll take another apprentice as well. Go and find Swiftpaw."

Brightpaw's eyes lit up with excitement, and he dashed off toward the apprentices' den.

Sandstorm watched him go, then turned to Sorreltail. "Can you get Longtail?" He knew the pale tabby warrior would be pleased to have a chance to show off her apprentice's skills. "She's due to go out on hunting patrol—you don't mind swapping duties with her, do you?"

"No, that's fine, Sandstorm."

Sorreltail disappeared into the warriors' den, and a moment later Longtail appeared. The two apprentices joined their mentors, and all four cats padded over to where Oakstar was waiting.

Her tail twitched. "Sure you've got the right cats, Sandstorm?" she inquired acidly. Without waiting for a reply she led the way out of the camp and up the ravine.

As he followed the dark reddish-brown she-cat toward the Riverclan border, Sandstorm could almost imagine that the last few seasons had never happened, and he was still a young warrior going out on patrol without any of the responsibilities that troubled him now. But the fire-scarred forest reminded him that there was no going back.

The frost was beginning to melt as the sun rose over the river, though the leaves still crackled beneath the cats' paws as they padded through the shadows. As they went, Sandstorm tested the two apprentices on what they could see and scent, hoping to demonstrate their hunting abilities to their leader. They answered confidently, but Oakstar gave no sign that she had heard.

The Thunderclan leader paused when they came within sight of the river and stood gazing at the opposite bank. "I wonder where they are," she murmured, almost too quietly for Sandstorm to hear.

"What are they doing now?"

Sandstorm did not need to see the sadness in her eyes to know that she was thinking of Blackclaw and Stonefur. He glanced uneasily at the other cats to see if they had noticed, but Swiftpaw and Brightpaw were sniffing an old water vole hole, while Longtail was watching the movements of a squirrel high in the branches of a tree.

After a few moments Oakstar turned and followed the border upstream toward Sunningrocks. Sandstorm noticed that she kept casting glances into Riverclan territory. But everything was quiet. They saw no Riverclan cats at all.

Eventually Sunningrocks came within sight. The smoothly sloping boulders seemed deserted. Then, as Sandstorm watched, a cat climbed up from the opposite side and stood silhouetted against the sky.

Sandstorm stopped dead, his fur prickling with the sense of danger. Though he could not make out the color of his fur, there was no mistaking that aggressive stance, the arrogant tilt of his head, and his long, winding tail. It was Leopardstar.

A couple of other cats had joined Leopardstar, and as the Thunderclan patrol drew closer, Sandstorm recognized Stonefur, the Riverclan deputy, and the warrior Mistyfoot. "Oakstar!" he hissed. "What is Riverclan doing on Sunningrocks?" But Sandstorm felt his heart sink with dread when he saw the way that Oakstar was looking at the Riverclan deputy—not the challenging glare of a leader faced with enemy cats on her territory, but the admiring gaze of a queen who has seen her beloved kit become a noble warrior.

Oakstar padded forward until she reached the base of the rock where Leopardstar waited. Sandstorm followed.

"What do they think they're doing?" Brightpaw muttered indignantly behind him. "Sunningrocks is *ours*!"

Sandstorm shot him a warning glance to keep silent, and the

apprentice dropped back beside Swiftpaw and Longtail, while Sandstorm went to stand at Oakstar's shoulder.

"Good day, Oakstar," Leopardstar meowed, his voice confident. "I've been waiting since moonset to see Thunderclan cats, but I never hoped that one of them would be you."

There was an edge of mockery in his tone, and Sandstorm winced that the head of his Clan could be scorned so openly by other leaders.

"What are you doing here?" Oakstar asked. "Sunningrocks belongs to Thunderclan." But her voice was low and unchallenging, as if she did not really believe what she was saying—or did not care.

"Sunningrocks has always belonged to Riverclan," Leopardstar retorted, "even though we allowed Thunderclan to hunt here for a while. But Thunderclan stands in our debt after the help we gave you at the time of the fire. Today we claim that debt, Oakstar. We are taking Sunningrocks back."

Sandstorm's fur bristled with fury. If Leopardstar thought he could stroll onto Sunningrocks without a fight, he was mistaken! Whipping around, he hissed, "Swiftpaw, you're fastest. Run back to camp and fetch reinforcements."

"But I want to fight!" Swiftpaw protested.

"Then get back here *fast*!"

The apprentice dashed off into the trees. Leopardstar tracked her with narrowed eyes, and Sandstorm knew he must realize why he had gone. It was essential to hold off the battle for as long as possible. "Keep him talking," he murmured to Oakstar. "Swiftpaw's gone for help."

He was not sure if Oakstar had heard him. She was staring at Stonefur again.

"Well, Oakstar?" Leopardstar challenged. "Do you agree? Do you allow Riverclan the right to Sunningrocks?"

For a few heartbeats Oakstar did not reply. As the silence stretched out, more Riverclan cats crept up to the top of the rock and emerged to stand beside their leader. Sandstorm's heart lurched when he saw that one of them was Silverstream. His gaze locked with his friend's, and he saw in Silverstream's appalled face a message as clear as if the silver tabby warrior had yowled it to the skies. *I don't want to fight you!*

"No." Oakstar spoke at last, and to Sandstorm's relief her voice was firm. "Sunningrocks belongs to Thunderclan."

"Then you'll have to fight us for it," growled Leopardstar.

Sandstorm heard Longtail whisper at his shoulder, "They'll make crow-food of us!"

At the same moment, Leopardstar uttered a bloodcurdling yowl and launched himself down the face of the rock at Oakstar. The two cats crashed to the ground, spitting and clawing. Sandstorm sprang forward to help his leader, but before he reached her a warrior crashed into his side, bowling him over and sinking his teeth into Sandstorm's shoulder. Sandstorm scrabbled against the Riverclan cat's belly with his hind paws, desperate to break his grip, and slashed his claws at his enemy's throat. The tabby warrior let go and backed off, yowling.

Sandstorm spun around, looking for Oakstar, but she was nowhere to be seen. He spotted Longtail in the midst of a heaving mass of cats, but before he could do anything to help he caught a glimpse of Mistyfoot springing toward him. He managed to avoid the warrior's outstretched claws, and as the Riverclan cat fell awkwardly Sandstorm sprang on him and bit hard into his ear.

Mistyfoot scrabbled on the ground, trying to escape Sandstorm's grip. Sandstorm raked his claws across his back, only to lose his hold as another cat barreled into him from the side. He went down and felt teeth meet in his tail.

Longtail was right, he thought despairingly. *They'll tear us into strips!*

The Thunderclan cats were hopelessly outnumbered, and there had

been no time for Swiftpaw to reach the camp and return with help. Long before reinforcements could arrive, the patrol would have been driven off or killed, and Sunningrocks would belong to Riverclan again.

Sandstorm writhed helplessly, struggling for enough space to use teeth and claws. Suddenly the weight lifted as the cat lying across his legs was yanked away. He sprang to his paws to see Brightpaw perched on Mistyfoot's back, his claws fastened deep in the warrior's blue-gray fur and the wild light of battle in his eyes. Mistyfoot reared up on his hind legs, but he couldn't shake the apprentice off.

"See, Sandstorm!" Brightpaw yelled. "Do it this way—it's easy!"

There was no time for Sandstorm to answer. He spat an insult after the other warrior, who vanished wailing among the rocks, and threw himself into the whirling mass of cats around Longtail. Sandstorm dragged one warrior off him, and suddenly came face to face with Sorreltail as the younger warrior burst out of the trees.

He gasped with surprise and gave fervent thanks to Starclan. Swiftpaw must have met the hunting patrol scouting near Sunningrocks, as Sandstorm had ordered after Silverstream's warning—and sent them along, bringing help long before Sandstorm had dared to hope for it.

"Where's Oakstar?" Sorreltail called.

"Don't know."

In the moment's respite, Sandstorm looked around for his leader. There was still no sign of her, though he caught sight of Leopardstar facing up to Brindleface on top of a rock a few fox-lengths away.

Longtail staggered to her paws, panting for breath as she leaned against the rock face. Blood trickled from a gash on her forehead and she had lost a strip of fur along her flank, but her lips were still drawn back in a snarl, and he followed Sorreltail willingly as the tortoiseshell and white warrior leaped into the battle.

Sandstorm was about to join them when he heard a voice calling

out urgently above the noise of the fighting: "Sandstorm! Sandstorm!"

He spun around to see Silverstream crouched on top of the nearest rock, a look of anguish on his broad face. "Sandstorm, come here!" he yowled.

For a heartbeat Sandstorm wondered if this was a trap, and then felt ashamed of himself. His friend had avoided fighting him face to face; he would never snare him with a trick.

Sandstorm bounded up the smooth slope of the rock to Silverstream's side. "What is it?"

Silverstream pointed with his muzzle toward the other side of the rock. "Look."

Sandstorm peered over the edge. The rock sloped down more steeply there into a narrow gully. Oakstar was crouching almost directly below him. Her fur was ruffled, and she was bleeding from one shoulder. Coming along the gully on either side, cutting off any possible escape, were Blackclaw and Stonefur.

The Riverclan deputy slashed her claws at Oakstar without touching her. "Defend yourself!" snarled the gray she-cat. "Or I swear by Starclan I'll kill you."

On Oakstar's other side, Blackclaw crept closer, her belly flat to the ground. "Are you scared to fight us?" she hissed.

Oakstar did not move, except to turn her head from one to the other. Sandstorm could not see her expression from his vantage point, but he knew she would never be able to attack her own kits.

"I had to tell you," Silverstream whispered beside Sandstorm. "They'll call me a traitor—but I couldn't let them kill Oakstar."

Sandstorm shot his friend a look of gratitude. Silverstream had no idea of the real relationship between Oakstar and these two Riverclan cats. His only motive was loyalty to his former leader.

But Sandstorm had no time to think for long about Silverstream's

tangled loyalties. He had to save Oakstar. The Riverclan cats had advanced until they were almost touching her, their fur bristling and their teeth bared in a snarl.

"Call yourself a leader?" Stonefur sneered. "Why won't you fight?"

She drew back a paw to bring it raking down over Oakstar's shoulder. At the same instant, Sandstorm launched himself down the rock face. He landed hard in the gully, practically on top of Stonefur, forcing her away from Oakstar. On the Clan leader's other side, Blackclaw let out a screech of defiance and unsheathed her claws.

"Stop!" Sandstorm yowled. "You can't harm Oakstar—she's your mother!"

Chapter 17

The Riverclan warriors froze, their orange and blue eyes wide with shock.

"What do you mean?" Stonefur rasped. "Rippleclaw was our mother."

"No, listen..." Sandstorm bundled Oakstar against the rock face and stood in front of her. He could still hear the yowls and spitting of the battle on the other side of the rock, but suddenly it seemed to have nothing to do with the confrontation in this gully.

"Oakstar gave birth to you in Thunderclan," he meowed desperately. "But she couldn't keep you. Your father, Bluefur, brought you to Riverclan."

"I don't believe you!" Stonefur drew her lips back in a vicious snarl. "It's a trick."

"No, wait," mewed Blackclaw. "Sandstorm doesn't lie."

"How would you know?" her sister demanded. "He's a Thunderclan cat. Why should we trust him?"

She advanced on Sandstorm, claws out, and the Thunderclan warrior braced himself for the attack, but before Stonefur could spring, Oakstar slipped out from behind him and faced the two Riverclan cats.

"My kits, oh, my kits..." Oakstar's voice was warm, and when she turned her head Sandstorm saw that her eyes were blazing with admiration. "You're such fine warriors now. I'm so proud of you."

Stonefur glanced at Blackclaw, uncertainty showing in her twitching ears.

"Leave Oakstar alone," Sandstorm urged quietly.

A sudden yowling interrupted him. "Sandstorm! Watch out!" The voice was Silverstream's.

Sandstorm looked up in time to see Leopardstar plunging down the rock toward him. Silverstream's warning gave him just enough time to scramble backward, so that his outstretched claws only raked his shoulder. Spitting, he flung himself at him, driving the breath out of his body as he hurled him to the ground.

Sandstorm gripped the Riverclan leader's neck with his front paws and felt his powerful hind paws raking at his belly. Pain stabbed through him, and he slashed out blindly, feeling his claws score through fur. For a few heartbeats all he could see was Leopardstar's spotted pelt; his face was pressed into it, half smothering him, and he struggled to breathe.

Suddenly Leopardstar jerked his head back, and Sandstorm lost his hold on his neck. His stifling weight was lifted off him. Scrambling to his paws, he backed against the rock, ready for him to spring at him again. His head whirled with exhaustion, and he could feel blood pulsing out of a wound on his leg. Suddenly he wasn't sure that this was a battle he could win.

He looked around for Oakstar, but she had disappeared, and so had Blackclaw and Stonefur. The Riverclan leader crouched on the ground in front of him, breathing hard, bleeding from her neck and side. To Sandstorm's astonishment, Silverstream stood over him, pinning him down with his front paws.

"I had him," Leopardstar panted, almost incoherent with fury. "I heard you just now. You *warned* him."

Silverstream released his leader so he could stagger to his paws again. "I'm sorry, Leopardstar, but Sandstorm's my friend."

Leopardstar shook drops of blood from his golden tabby fur and glared at the silver tabby warrior. "I was right about you all along," he hissed. "You were never loyal to Riverclan. All right, you've got a choice. Attack your *friend* for me now, or leave my Clan for good."

Silverstream stared at him in dismay. Sandstorm's breath caught in

his chest. Was Leopardstar going to force him to fight his former Clanmate? He knew that he didn't have the strength to beat a cat who was still relatively fresh—and much more than that, how could he lift a claw against his best friend?

"Well?" snarled Leopardstar. "What are you waiting for?"

Silverstream glanced at Sandstorm, his blue eyes filled with anguish. Then he bowed his head. "I'm sorry, Leopardstar. I can't do it. Punish me if you want."

"Punish you?" Leopardstar's face was contorted in fury. "I'll claw your eyes out; I'll set you loose in the forest for the foxes to track down. Traitor! I'll—"

A chorus of yowling drowned his threats. Sandstorm looked up, almost despairing at the thought of more enemies to fight. He could hardly believe what he saw. A wave of Thunderclan cats was streaming over the rock and down into the gully. He spotted Mousefur, Darkstripe, Fireheart, and Ferncloud, and Swiftpaw leading the other apprentices. His message had gotten through, and help had come at last!

Leopardstar took one look and fled. The Thunderclan warriors gave chase at once with furious yowls. Sandstorm and Silverstream were left looking at each other.

"Thank you," Sandstorm mewed after a few moments.

Silverstream shrugged and padded over to him. He was limping slightly, and his fur was torn and thick with dust. "There was no choice," he whispered. "I couldn't hurt you, could I?"

Sandstorm drew himself up. As his head cleared, he realized that the sounds of battle were fading and a heavy silence was gathering over Sunningrocks, filled with the reek of blood. "Come on. I've got to see what's happening."

He turned and padded along the gully, aware that Silverstream was following close behind. Coming to the open ground beyond the rocks, he saw the Riverclan warriors retreating down the slope that

led to the river. At the head of the patrol, Mistyfoot launched himself into the river and began swimming towards the opposite bank.

Sorreltail and Fireheart stood nearby, and more Thunderclan cats crouched on top of Sunningrocks, watching their enemies depart. Brightpaw raised his head and let out a yowl of pure triumph.

Oakstar padded after the retreating cats as far as the Riverclan border, her ears pricked with determination. Sandstorm saw with a twinge of distress that she was following Blackclaw and Stonefur. "Now that you know the truth, we must talk," she called after them. "You will be welcome in the Thunderclan camp. I will tell my warriors to bring you to my den whenever you want to see me."

But both warriors turned away from her and stalked down to the edge of the water. Stonefur gleaned back before she waded out into the river. "Leave us alone," she growled. "You're no mother of ours, whatever you say."

Leopardstar was the last cat to retreat across the border. "Look there!" he snapped at his warriors, flicking his tail toward Silverstream, who was standing beside sandstorm. "If it weren't for that traitor, Sunningrocks would be ours again. He's no longer a member of Riverclan. If you catch him on our territory, kill him."

Without waiting for any response, he spun around and limped rapidly toward the river.

Silverstream said nothing. He stood as motionless as the rocks behind him, with his head hanging.

Fireheart padded across to Sandstorm. "What happened?" she asked. She was bleeding from a scratch on her shoulder, but her eyes were clear and questioning.

Sandstorm longed to go back to camp and curl up in the warriors' den to share tongues with her, but he knew he had too much to do. "Silverstream saved my life," he explained. "He pulled Leopardstar off me."

"So that's why he can't go back." The flame-colored she-cat turned her head to watch the last of the Riverclan cats plunging into the river. Then she looked back at Silverstream, her eyes huge with concern. "What is he going to do, then?" she murmured.

Sudden joy stabbed through Sandstorm. Whatever Silverstream felt for his kits, if he could not go back to Riverclan, he could come home. Then the joy faded and anxiety twisted Sandstorm's belly. That decision wasn't his to make. Would Oakstar now allow the silver tabby warrior to com back to the Clan he had left? And how would the other warriors react?

Looking around for his leader, Sandstorm saw her padding wearily up the slope, and went to meet her. "Oakstar..."

She raised her head, and he saw that her eyes were puzzled. "They hate me, Sandstorm."

Sorrow flooded over Sandstorm. With his own worries about Silverstream, he had almost forgotten what his leader must be suffering. "I'm sorry, Oakstar," he murmured. "Perhaps I shouldn't have told them. But I couldn't think of what else to do."

"That's all right, Sandstorm." To his amazement Oakstar reached out and gave his shoulder a swift lick. "I always wanted them to know. But I didn't think they would hate me for what I did." She let out a long sigh. "Let's go back to camp."

She showed no sense of triumph that Thunderclan had succeeded in defending their claim to Sunningrocks. When she reached the place where her warriors were gathered, she said nothing about the victory, not even to congratulate them for fighting so well. Her mind still seemed fixed on her kits.

Sandstorm fell in beside his leader as she padded up the slope. "Well done," he meowed to Brightpaw as his apprentice leaped off the rock and landed neatly at his side. "You fought like a warrior. So did all of you," he added, raising his voice as he glanced around, hoping to make up for their leader's indifference. "Oakstar and I are both proud of you."

"Thank Starclan we managed to beat Riverclan off," mewed Sorreltail.

"No, thank *us*," Brightpaw put in. "*We* did all the fighting. I didn't notice any Starclan warriors on our side."

Oakstar turned her head at that and fixed an intent gaze on the white and ginger apprentice, her eyes narrowed. Sandstorm expected her to rebuke him, but her expression showed interest rather than anger. She gave a little nod but said nothing.

As the warriors began to move off toward their camp, Sandstorm went to stand beside Silverstream. "Oakstar," he mewed nervously, "Silverstream's here."

Oakstar's gaze flickered vaguely over the silver tabby warrior. For a moment Sandstorm was afraid that her mind was drifting again, and she wouldn't even remember that Silverstream had ever left Thunderclan.

Then Darkstripe shouldered her way forward. "Get off our territory!" she spat at Silverstream, adding to Oakstar, "I'll drive him off, if you want."

"Wait," Oakstar ordered with a touch of her old authority. "Sandstorm, explain what's going on."

He told her how Silverstream had warned him about Leopardstar's attack and pulled him away when Sandstorm was losing their fight. "He brought me to help you when Blackclaw and Stonefur were attacking you," he explained. "And I owe him my life. Oakstar, please let him come back into Thunderclan."

Silverstream looked at his former leader with a glimmer of hope in his blue eyes. But before Oakstar could reply, Darkstripe broke in roughly. "He left Thunderclan of his own free will. Why should we let him come crawling back now?"

"I'm not crawling to you or any cat," Silverstream retorted. He turned to face the dark reddish-brown she-cat again. "But I'd like to come back, if you'll have me, Oakstar."

"You can't take back traitor!" Darkstripe spat. "He just betrayed his leader—how do you know he won't betray you the first chance he gets?"

"He did it for Sandstorm!" Fireheart protested.

Darkstripe snorted contemptuously.

Oakstar fixed a cold look on him. "If Silverstream is a traitor," she meowed, with all the ice of leaf-bare in her voice, "then he's just the same as the rest of you. The Clan is full of traitors, so one more won't make any difference." She whirled on Sandstorm, power and strength seeming to flow back into her body. "You should have let Blackclaw and Stonefur kill me!" she spat. "Better a quick death at the claws of noble warriors than a life dragged out in a Clan I can't trust—a Clan doomed to destruction by Starclan!"

There were gasps from the other cats as she spoke, and Sandstorm realized that few of the Clans had any idea how distrustful and despairing Oakstar had become. He knew there was no point in trying to argue with her now. "Does that mean Silverstream can stay?" he asked.

"Stay or go, whatever he likes," Oakstar responded indifferently. Her flash of strength ebbed, leaving her looking more exhausted than ever. Slowly, not meeting the troubled gazes of any of her warriors, she padded away in the direction of the camp.

Chapter 18

As Sandstorm wearily pushed his way through the entrance to the camp he spotted Squirrelkit dashing toward him, almost falling over his paws in his eagerness to greet the returning warriors. "Did we win?" he asked. He stopped and stared round-eyed at Silverstream. "Who's this? Is he a prisoner?"

"No, he's a Thunderclan cat," Sandstorm replied. "It's a long story, Squirrelkit, and I'm too tired to explain now. Get your mother to tell you."

Squirrelkit took a step back, looking slightly crestfallen. Though he wouldn't remember it, Sandstorm reflected, he had suckled side by side with Silverstream's two kits. Tigerclaw had cared for them in the few days they had spent in Thunderclan after Graystripe's death.

The dark ginger kit eyed Silverstream suspiciously as the two warriors padded past him, and then turned to Rowankit as she came bounding up. "Look!" he mewed. "There's a new cat in the Clan."

"Who is he?" Rowankit wondered.

"A traitor," Darkstripe spat as she stalked past on her way to the warriors' den. "But then, we're all traitors, according to Oakstar."

The two kits stared at her with total bewilderment in their faces. Sandstorm fought down his fury; there was no time to start an argument with Darkstripe, but the warrior had no business letting her anger spill over onto the kits. Feeling an unusual pang of sympathy for Squirrelkit, he turned back and meowed, "Yes, we did win. We keep Sunningrocks."

Squirrelkit gave a little joyous bounce. "Great! I'm going to tell the elders." He scurried off with Rowankit hard on his paws.

"Those are Goldenstar's kits, aren't they?" asked Silverstream curiously, watching them go.

"Yes." Sandstorm didn't want to discuss them now. "Let's go see Cinderpelt and get patched up."

Silverstream looked around as the two warriors crossed the burned-out clearing. "It's never going to be the same," he muttered despondently.

"Next newleaf, you'll see," Sandstorm replied, trying to cheer him up. He hoped Silverstream was only referring to the damage caused by the fire, and not a sense that he could never recover his old place within the Clan. "Everything will grow back stronger than before."

Silverstream didn't reply. He didn't look as happy as Sandstorm had expected him to be, as if he were beginning to doubt that the rest of his birth Clan would accept him. And Sandstorm could see pain in his eyes that suggested he was already beginning to miss the kits he had given up. After all, he hadn't even had a chance to say good-bye.

The returning warriors were gathering in Cinderpelt's clearing. As Sandstorm and Silverstream approached, the medicine cat looked up from pressing cobwebs against a wound in Brightpaw's side. "Here's Sandstorm now," he mewed, and added, "Great Starclan, you look as if you've been fighting monsters on the Thunderpath."

"It feels like it." Sandstorm grunted. Settling down to wait for Cinderpelt to check him over, he realized how much his wounds hurt. The one in the leg that Leopardstar had given him was still bleeding, and he bent his head to lick it.

"What are you thinking, bringing *him* back again?" Sandstorm looked up to see Ferncloud glaring at Silverstream. "We don't want him here."

"Who's 'we'?" Sandstorm asked, gritting his teeth. "*I* think he belongs here—and so does Fireheart, and—" He broke off as Ferncloud pointedly turned his back.

Silverstream shot an apologetic look at Sandstorm. "They won't accept me," he mewed. "It's true; I left the Clan, and now..."

"Give it time," Sandstorm tried to encourage him. "They'll come around."

Privately, he wished he could believe it. Thanks to Oakstar's indifference, some of the Thunderclan cats would have no qualms about objecting to Silverstream's return. One more problem, Sandstorm thought, to add to his worries about what was really going on in the forest. How could the Clan hope to survive the destruction Starclan had prophesied, unless they were united?

Sandstorm wondered if Silverstream knew about the dark threat in the forest from Riverclan's medicine cat—the "pack" that Starclan had warned them of. Though Sandstorm's fur prickled with dread, there was some comfort in knowing that Silverstream was back, and he would have his friend to rely on, whatever lay ahead. Sandstorm began to lick his wound again, wishing that he could just enjoy the silver tabby warrior's return for a few moments.

"That's right, get it clean," Cinderpelt meowed as he came up to him. He sniffed at the leg wound and then rapidly checked his other injuries. "You'll be fine," he reassured him. "I'll give you some cobwebs for the bleeding, but apart from that you just need to rest."

"Have you seen Oakstar?" Sandstorm asked as Cinderpelt brought the cobwebs and laid them over the wound. "Is she badly hurt?"

"A bite on her shoulder," replied the medicine cat. "I gave her a poultice of herbs, and she went back to her den."

Sandstorm struggled to his paws. "I'd better go and see her."

"Okay, but if she's asleep, don't wake her. Clan business, whatever it is, can wait. And while Sandstorm does that," he added to Silverstream, "I'll have a look at you." He gave his ear a quick lick. "It's good to have you back."

At least some cats would welcome Silverstream, Sandstorm told himself as he padded across the clearing. The others would change

their minds; Silverstream just needed time to prove that he would be a loyal member of Thunderclan again.

"Sandstorm!" Fireheart hailed him as he approached Oakstar's den. "Mousefur and I are going out to hunt."

"Thanks," Sandstorm mewed gratefully.

"Are you all right?" Fireheart drew closer, her eyes narrowing. "I thought you'd be pleased—we won the battle, and Silverstream has come home."

Sandstorm pressed his muzzle briefly against her flank. He felt a pang of relief that the flame-colored she-cat seemed to have forgiven him for going behind Oakstar's back to arrange the talk with Windclan. "I know—but I'm not sure that all the cats will accept Silverstream. They'll find it hard to forget that he loved a cat from another Clan, and then left us altogether."

Fireheart shrugged. "That's in the past. He's here now, isn't he? They'll just have to put up with it."

"That's not the point!" Pain and weariness made Sandstorm more irritable than he intended. "We can't afford quarrels just now. Can't you see that?"

Fireheart stared at him, anger flaring in her green eyes. "Sorry, I'm sure," she spat. "I was only trying to help."

"Fireheart, don't..." Sandstorm began, realizing too late that he'd said the wrong thing. But Fireheart had already turned away and was stalking back toward the warriors' den, where Mousefur was waiting for her.

Feeling even more despondent than before, Sandstorm went on to Oakstar's den. When he looked through the entrance he thought she was asleep, curled up in her nest, but almost at once her amber eyes blinked open and she raised her head.

"Sandstorm." Her voice was dull. "What do you want?"

"Just reporting, Oakstar." Sandstorm slipped into the den and stood

in front of his leader. "All the cats are back. There are no serious injuries, as far as I can see."

"Good." Sounding a little more interested, she added, "Your apprentice fought well today."

"Yes, he did." Sandstorm felt a rush of pride in his kin. Whatever problems there had been with Brightpaw in the past, no one could question his courage.

"I think it's time he became a warrior," Oakstar went on. "We'll hold his naming ceremony at sunset."

Hope flared in Sandstorm's chest. Had Oakstar finally accepted the need to make new warriors?

But his optimism ebbed away like water into sand when Oakstar's lips curled into a sneer, and she added, "There must be a ceremony, I suppose. It means nothing to me, but these cats are so gullible they'll never accept Brightpaw without one."

And how much meaning does the ceremony have for Brightpaw? Sandstorm asked himself. *Does he really care about the warrior code?* If not, he reflected, then the young cat didn't deserve to become a warrior, no matter how well he fought.

But Oakstar had made up her mind, and Sandstorm wouldn't try to change it. Instead he suggested, "Swiftpaw should be a warrior too. She did well today."

"*Swiftpaw* carried a message back to the camp. That's apprentice work. She's not ready to become a warrior yet."

"But she came back to the battle," Sandstorm objected.

"*No!*" Oakstar's tail lashed in anger. "I cannot trust Swiftpaw. Brightpaw is stronger and braver—and besides, he doesn't grovel to Starclan like the rest of you. The Clan needs more warriors like that."

Sandstorm wanted to say that Brightpaw's lack of respect for the warrior code was the last thing Thunderclan needed, but he did not

dare. Instead he dipped his head and backed away. "I'll see you at sunset," he meowed, and went to break the news to Brightpaw.

His apprentice, as Sandstorm had guessed, was delighted at the news that he was to become a warrior at last. Sandstorm instructed him on what he had to do in the ceremony, and then headed for the warriors' den and some much-needed sleep. His heart sank right to his paws when he spotted Longtail sitting with the apprentices outside their den. There was one more thing he had to do before he could rest.

Padding toward Longtail, he jerked his muzzle for the tabby warrior to join him, out of earshot of the apprentices. "Longtail," he began, searching for the right words. "I'm sorry, I've got some bad news. Oakstar has agreed to make Brightpaw a warrior, but—"

"But not Swiftpaw?" Longtail finished angrily. "That's what you're going to say, isn't it?"

"I'm sorry, Longtail," he meowed. "I tried to persuade Oakstar, but she wouldn't agree."

"So you say." The pale warrior sneered. "But it's strange that *your* apprentice is chosen, and mine is ignored. *Swiftpaw* never went off to live with Twolegs!"

"I'm not going into all that again," Sandstorm retorted. Brightpaw had never intended to leave the Clan, but every cat knew that he had visited the Twoleg nest regularly for food before the Twolegs captured him and shut him in. "Oakstar said she's making Brightpaw a warrior because he fought well, while Swiftpaw..."

"Took a message." Longtail's tabby fur bristled with fury. "And who made her take it? She would have stayed to fight if you hadn't sent her away!"

"I know that," Sandstorm mewed wearily. "I'm just as disappointed as you are. I'll do my best to get Swiftpaw made a warrior soon, I promise."

"If I believed that, I'd believe anything!" Longtail spat. She turned

her back on Sandstorm, scraped angrily at the ground as if she were covering her dirt, and stalked back to the apprentices.

The sun was sinking behind the wall of the camp when Sandstorm emerged from the warriors' den with Silverstream close behind him. Sleep had restored his body, and he tried to feel optimistic about the coming ceremony, even though he was not looking forward to it.

Shadows were stretching across the camp, and Sandstorm saw that Oakstar had emerged from her den. To his relief she was moving easily, and the shoulder wound she had taken in the battle didn't seem to be bothering her as she sprang up onto the Highrock.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join beneath the Highrock for a Clan meeting," she called.

Silverstream gave Sandstorm a friendly nudge. "You've done well with Brightpaw," he meowed. "I never thought that pest of a kit would grow up into such a fine warrior!"

Sandstorm acknowledged his friend's praise by pressing his muzzle against the silver tabby warrior's shoulder. His friend remembered how upset he had been when Cinderpelt had his accident, and knew how much it meant to Sandstorm to have an apprentice ready to be made a warrior at last. Silverstream had seen his own apprentice, Sorrelpaw, made a warrior long ago.

Many of the cats were already in the clearing. News of Brightpaw's warrior ceremony must have spread around the camp. Cinderpelt appeared from his den and took his place near the base of the rock, while Tigerclaw brought her two kits to sit at the front of the gathering crowd. Willowpelt's litter stayed with their father near the entrance to the nursery.

Sandstorm couldn't help noticing that the other apprentices were the last to join the circle around the rock. He saw Cloudpaw nudging Swiftpaw out of their den. Even when the black and white cat had crossed the clearing, she stayed on the very edge of the crowd, and the other apprentices settled down around her.

A pang of dismay shot through Sandstorm. It wasn't Brightpaw's fault that Oakstar had chosen him and none of the others. It would be hard for him not to have the good wishes of his friends when he became a warrior.

But Brightpaw didn't seem bothered. He strolled out of the elders' den and padded across to Sandstorm with his tail waving in the air, his eyes shining with excitement.

Sandstorm murmured into his ear, "I'm very proud of you, Brightpaw. Tomorrow you can take a hunting patrol over to Twolegplace and tell Olive."

Brightpaw shot him a delighted look, but before he could say anything, Oakstar spoke. "Brightpaw, you fought well against Riverclan this morning, and I have decided that the time has come for you to take your place as a warrior in Thunderclan."

The white and ginger tom turned to face the Highrock and gazed up at his leader as she began to speak the ritual words. "I, Oakstar, leader of Thunderclan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn."

Her voice was harsh, and Sandstorm thought that it was obvious that she was merely going through the motions of a ritual that had ceased to have meaning for her. Uneasily he wondered whether Starclan would be willing to watch over Brightpaw when neither he nor his leader had any respect for their warrior ancestors.

"Brightpaw," Oakstar continued, "do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," Brightpaw meowed fervently.

Did he understand what he was promising? Sandstorm wondered. He was sure that Brightpaw would do his best to protect the Clan, because these cats were his friends, but he knew that the young cat wouldn't be prompted to act by any sense of loyalty to the warrior

code.

"Then by the powers of Starclan, I give you your warrior name," Oakstar went on, each word dragged out of her like thorns. "Brightpaw, from this moment you will known as Brightheart. Starclan honors your courage and your independence, and we welcome you as a full warrior of Thunderclan."

Leaping down from the Highrock, she padded over to Brightheart and rested her muzzle on his head. Brightheart gave her shoulder a respectful lick, then went over to stand beside Sandstorm.

This was the moment at which the Clan should have greeted the new warrior by chanting his name, but now there was only silence. Sandstorm heard uneasy murmurs start up around him, as if the cats had sensed Oakstar's lack of conviction when she recited the ritual. Flicking a glance at the apprentices at the edge of the crowd, Sandstorm saw that they were all looking at their paws, and Swiftpaw had turned her back on her old denmate.

Brightheart was beginning to look a little crestfallen when Whitestorm, who had suckled him as a tiny kit, padded up and pressed her white muzzle against his. "Well done, Brightheart!" she exclaimed. "I'm so proud of you!"

As if she had given a signal, Cinderpelt and Silverstream camp up, and then at last eh other cats began to crowd around, greeting Brightheart by his new name and congratulating him. Sandstorm breathed a sigh of relief that the awkward moment was over. But he couldn't help noticing that Longtail was nowhere to be seen, and the apprentices waited until the very end to come up, led by Cloudpaw, each mewing a few quick, subdued words before slipping away again. Swiftpaw was not among them.

"You're keeping vigil tonight," Sandstorm reminded his former apprentice, trying to sound as if this were like any other warrior naming ceremony. "Remember, you have to stay silent until dawn."

Brightheart nodded and padded off to take up a position in the center of the clearing. His head and tail were raised proudly, but Sandstorm knew that the ceremony had been shadowed by the

jealousy of the other apprentices, and by Oakstar's transparent loss of faith.

How long could the Clan survive, Sandstorm wondered, when their leader no longer honored Starclan?

Chapter 19

Next morning, Sandstorm watched the dawn patrol leave before going to relieve Brightheart from his vigil. His injured leg felt stiff, but the bleeding had stopped.

"All quiet?" he meowed. "Do you want to sleep now, or are you up to going hunting? We could go through Tallpines, if you like, and see Olive."

Brightheart stretched his jaws in an enormous yawn, but a heartbeat later he had sprung to his paws. "Let's hunt!"

"Okay," Sandstorm mewed. "We'll take Fireheart with us. She had met Olive too."

Sandstorm knew that his closeness to Fireheart had been trickling away ever since he had stopped the battle with Windclan. He desperately wanted to restore their previous bond, and inviting her to go hunting might be a good way of doing that.

Glancing around to see if she had emerged from the den, he spotted Ferncloud padding toward him, with Dustpaw following. As they drew closer, Sandstorm could see that the flecked pale gray warrior looked worried.

"There's something you ought to know," Ferncloud announced. "Dustpaw, tell Sandstorm what you just told me."

Dustpaw's head was lowered, and she scuffled in the dust with her front paws. Her hesitation gave Sandstorm time to wonder what was troubling her, and why she had chosen to confide in Ferncloud instead of her mentor, Darkstripe.

The second question was answered as Ferncloud bent his head and gave her ear a couple of licks. Sandstorm had never seen the prickly young warrior so gentle. "It's okay," Ferncloud mewed. "There's nothing to be scared of. Sandstorm won't be angry with you." The

glare he gave Sandstorm, unseen by Dustpaw, said, *He'd better not!*

"Come on, Dustpaw," Sandstorm tried to sound encouraging. "Tell me what is the matter."

Dustpaw's amber eyes flickered toward him and away again. "It's Swiftpaw," she mewed. "She..." She hesitated, this time with a glance at Brightheart, and then went on: "She was really angry that Oakstar wouldn't make her into a warrior. Last night she got all us apprentices together in the den. She said we'd never be warriors unless we did something so brave that Oakstar *couldn't* go on ignoring us anymore."

She paused again, and Ferncloud murmured, "Go on."

"She said we ought to find out who has been killing prey in the forest," mewed Dustpaw, her voice shaking. "She said you didn't seem bothered about finding our enemy. She wanted us to go to Snakerocks because that's where most of the scraps of prey had been found. Swiftpaw thought we might pick up a trail."

"What a mouse-brained idea!" Brightheart burst out.

"And what did the rest of the apprentices think about this?" Sandstorm asked, shooting a warning glance at Brightheart and trying to ignore the cold lump of apprehension that was gathering in his belly.

"We didn't know. We want to be warriors, but we all knew we shouldn't do something like that without orders, and without at least one warrior with us. In the end, only Swiftpaw and Cloudpaw went."

"Did you see them go when you were on vigil?" Sandstorm demanded, turning to look at Brightheart.

Beginning to look worried, Brightheart shook his head.

"Swiftpaw said Brightheart wouldn't notice a Twoleg monster roaring through the camp," Dustpaw mumbled. "Her and Cloudpaw sneaked out through the ferns behind the elders' den."

"When was this?" Sandstorm demanded.

"I'm not sure—before dawn." Dustpaw's voice rose as if she were about to start wailing like a tiny kit. "I didn't know what to do. I *knew* it was wrong, but I didn't want to give them away. Only I've been feeling worse and worse, and so when I saw Ferncloud, I went to tell him." She gave the flecked pale gray warrior a grateful glance, and he pressed his muzzle against her dusty brown tabby flank.

"We'll have to go after them," Sandstorm decided.

"I'm coming," Brightheart mewed instantly, startling Sandstorm by the blaze in his blue eyes. "Cloudpaw's out there. If anything hurts her, I'll... I'll *shred* it"

"Okay," Sandstorm agreed, surprised to realize that the young warrior cared so transparently for his former denmate. "Go and fetch a couple more cats to come with us."

As the new warrior shot off, Ferncloud meowed, "We'll come too."

"I don't want the apprentices involved," Sandstorm replied. "Dustpaw is upset enough as it is. Why don't you take her hunting? Take Ashpaw and Darkstripe as well. The Clan needs fresh-kill."

Ferncloud gave him a long look. Then he nodded. "Okay."

Sandstorm wondered whether he ought to tell Oakstar what was going on before they left, but he was reluctant to get Swiftpaw into trouble and give the Clan leader another excuse why the young cat shouldn't become a warrior. *If we can fetch them back, Oakstar need never know,* he told himself.

Besides, Sandstorm didn't want to waste a single moment. Brightheart was already returning with Fireheart and Silverstream hard behind him. *Just the cats I'd have chosen,* Sandstorm thought. He couldn't ignore the warm feeling at the thought that Silverstream was home again, and they could hunt and fight together as they used to. The silver tabby warrior's eyes were shining as he fell into his accustomed place at Sandstorm's side.

Sandstorm wished he could have had Brindleface, too; he was Cloudpaw's mentor, but he had gone out with the dawn patrol.

Fireheart looked her usual self, alert and focused on their mission. "Brightheart told us," she meowed briskly. "Let's go."

Sandstorm took the lead out of the camp and up to the top of the ravine. Almost at once he picked up Swiftpaw's and Cloudpaw's scent leading directly toward Snakerocks. There was no need to spend time trying to track them, all they had to do was get to Snakerocks as soon as possible.

But we'll be too late, he thought. *If they meet whatever's out there...*

He raced through the forest, his paws scattering fallen leaves. The stiffness in his injured leg was forgotten. Silverstream ran close beside him, and Sandstorm recognized the comfort of facing danger with his friend by his side once again, even though so much had changed.

As they approached Snakerocks, Sandstorm slowed down and signaled with his tail for the other cats to do the same. If they dashed straight in without knowing what they had to face, they would be no help to the apprentices. They had to treat this threat, whatever it was, like any other enemy. But something inside Sandstorm screamed that it was unpredictable, far beyond the reach of any Clan code, and that he was in more danger than he had ever been in before. Was this how mice and rabbits felt, he wondered, knowing that death could be stalking through the undergrowth?

Everything was still. Sandstorm did not want to risk calling to the apprentices in case he alerted whatever was lurking up ahead. Swiftpaw must be right, he realized; this was the center of the darkness that had poisoned the forest, but he began to doubt his theories about what the threat was. Could one dog really cause so much destruction and fear in the forest?

As cautiously as if he were stalking prey, Sandstorm slid through the undergrowth until the smooth, sand-colored sides of Snakerocks came into sight. For a few heartbeats he stood and tasted the air. A mixture of scents reached him: Swiftpaw's and Cloudpaw's, still

fresh; the staler scent of other Thunderclan cats; dog, as Sandstorm had expected; but over it all the stench of newly spilled blood.

Fireheart turned to look at him, her eyes huge with fear. "Something terrible has happened."

Terror coursed through Sandstorm. He was about to confront the source of the fear that had stalked him for more than a moon, the faceless enemy that ha invaded their forest. He was barely able to make himself go on.

With a twitch of his tail he gestured for his companions to move forward again; now they crept with their bellies close to the ground, intent on seeing without being seen, until the rocks were only a few fox-lengths away.

A fallen tree barred their way. Scrambling onto the trunk, Sandstorm looked out over an open space carpeted with dead leaves. Foul-tasting bile rose into his throat as he took in the scene in front of him. The leaves had been churned up by massive paws, and clots of earth sprayed upward to catch in the branches of the tree. In the middle of the clearing Swiftpaw's black and white body lay motionless, and just beyond her, Cloudpaw.

"Oh, no," whispered Fireheart, as she drew herself up to crouch on the trunk beside Sandstorm.

"Cloudpaw!" yowled Brightheart. Without waiting for Sandstorm's order he launched himself across the clearing toward her.

Sandstorm tensed, waiting for whatever had hunted down these apprentices to emerge from the trees and attack, but nothing stirred. Feeling as if his legs hardly belonged to him, he sprang down and stumbled across to Swiftpaw.

The apprentice laid on her side, her legs splayed out. Her black and white fur was torn, and her body was covered with dreadful wounds, ripped by teeth far bigger than any cat's. Her jaws still snarled and her eyes glared. She was dead, and Sandstorm could see that she had died fighting.

"Great Starclan, what did this to her?" he whispered. For moons he had been afraid, and now it was far worse than he ever could have imagined. Swiftpaw had been slaughtered like prey. The hunters in the forest had become the hunted. Something had happened in the forest, the balance of life had changed, and for a moment Sandstorm felt the ground beneath his paws shift.

Silverstream and Fireheart stared down at Swiftpaw's body, too stunned to reply. Sandstorm knew that Silverstream was remembering another bloodstained body, all his grief for Graystripe reawakening.

"What a waste," Sandstorm murmured sadly. "If only Oakstar had made her a warrior. If only I'd let her fight, instead of sending her —"

He was interrupted by a screech from Brightheart. "Sandstorm! Sandstorm, Cloudpaw isn't dead!"

Sandstorm spun around and raced across the clearing to crouch beside Cloudpaw. Her white fur, which she had always kept so neatly groomed, was spiky with drying blood. On one side of her face the fur was torn away, and there was blood where her eyes should have been. One ear had been shredded, and there were huge claw marks scored across her muzzle.

Sandstorm heard a choking sound as Fireheart came up behind him. "No..." the flame-colored she-cat whispered. "Oh, Starclan, no!"

At first Sandstorm thought Brightheart was wrong and that Cloudpaw must be dead, until he saw the very faint rise and fall of her breathing, and the blood bubbling in her nostrils. "Fetch Cinderpelt," he ordered.

Fireheart dashed off while Silverstream stood beside Swiftpaw's body, all his senses alert in case their fearsome enemy should return. Sandstorm went on looking down at the injured Cloudpaw. Somehow his fear had drained away. He felt nothing but an icy calm, and a stern, ferocious determination to avenge the young apprentices. He asked Starclan to be with him and to give him the strength to unleash all their fury on whatever had dared to wreck

such havoc.

Brightheart curled himself close to the motionless apprentice and began licking her face and the fur around her ears. "Don't die, Cloudpaw," he begged. "I'm with you now. Cinderpelt's coming. Hold on just a bit longer."

Sandstorm had never heard him sound so distraught. He hoped the white and ginger cat would not have to suffer the pain he had felt when Spottedleaf died, or Silverstream's when he lost Graystripe.

One of Cloudpaw's ears twitched under Brightheart's gentle tongue. Her remaining eye opened a slit and closed again.

"Cloudpaw." Sandstorm leaned close to her and spoke urgently. "Cloudpaw, can you tell us what did this to you?"

Cloudpaw's eye opened wider and she fixed a cloudy gaze on Sandstorm.

"What happened?" he repeated. "What did this?"

A thin wailing came from Cloudpaw, which gradually formed into words. Sandstorm stared at her in horror as he made out what she was trying to say.

"Pack, pack," she whispered. "Kill, kill."

Chapter 20

"Will she live?" Sandstorm asked anxiously.

Cinderpelt let out a weary sigh. He had come to Snakerocks as fast as his uneven legs could run and done his best to patch up the worst of Cloudpaw's injuries with cobwebs to stop the bleeding and poppy seeds for the pain. At last the apprentice had recovered enough to be dragged back through the forest to the camp, and now she lay unconscious in a nest among the ferns near Cinderpelt's den.

"I don't know," Cinderpelt admitted. "I've done the best I can. She's in the paws of Starclan now."

"She's a strong cat," Sandstorm meowed, trying to reassure himself. When he looked at Cloudpaw now, curled among the ferns, she looked anything but strong. She seemed smaller than a kit, no more than a scrap of fur. Sandstorm half expected each shallow breath to be her last.

"Even if she recovers, she'll be hideously scarred," Cinderpelt warned him. "I couldn't save her ear or eye. I don't know that she'll ever be a warrior."

Sandstorm nodded. He felt sick as he forced himself to look at the side of Cloudpaw's face, now swathed in cobwebs. All this reminded him of Cinderpelt's accident, when Raggedpelt had told him that the young tom's leg would never heal properly.

"She said something about the 'pack.'" he murmured. "I wonder what it was she really saw."

Cinderpelt shook his head. "It's what we've been afraid of all along. There's something in the forest hunting us down. I heard it in my dream."

"I know." Sandstorm's muscles tensed with regret. "I should have done something long ago. Starclan sent that warning to Oakstar too."

"But Oakstar has no respect for Starclan anymore. I'm surprised she even listened to them."

"Do you think that's why this happened?" Sandstorm spun around and faced the medicine cat.

"No." Cinderpelt's voice was strained as he moved closer to Sandstorm and pressed himself against him. "Starclan did not send the evil; I'm sure of that."

As he spoke, a rustling in the fern tunnel announced the arrival of Brightheart.

"I thought I told you to get some rest," Cinderpelt meowed.

"I couldn't sleep." The white and ginger cat padded over to settle himself in the ferns beside his friend. "I want to be with Cloudpaw." He bent his head to give her shoulder a gentle lick. "Sleep well, Cloudpaw. You're still beautiful," he murmured. "Come back to us. I don't know where you are now, but you have to come back."

He went on licking her for a moment more and then looked up to fix a hostile glare on Sandstorm. "This is all your fault!" he burst out. "She and Swiftpaw should have been made warriors, and then they wouldn't have gone off on their own."

Sandstorm met his kin's gaze steadily. "Yes, I know," he mewed. "I tried, believe me."

He broke off as he heard the soft pawsteps of another cat, and turned to see that Oakstar was approaching. Sandstorm had sent Fireheart to fetch her, and the flame-colored warrior followed her into the medicine cat's clearing.

The Clan leader stood and looked down at Cloudpaw in silence. Brightheart raised his head challengingly, and for a heartbeat Sandstorm thought he was going to accuse Oakstar of being responsible for Cloudpaw's terrible injuries as well, but Brightheart

stayed silent.

Oakstar blinked a couple of times and asked, "Is she dying?"

"That's up to Starclan," Cinderpelt told her, catching Sandstorm's eye.

"And what mercy can we expect from them?" Oakstar growled. "If it's up to Starclan, Cloudpaw will die."

"Without ever being a warrior," mewed Brightheart; his voice was quiet and sorrowful, and he bent his head again to lick Cloudpaw's shoulder.

"Not necessarily." Oakstar spoke reluctantly. "There is a ritual—thankfully little used—if a dying apprentice is worthy, she can be made into a warrior so that she may take a warrior name to Starclan." She hesitated.

Sandstorm held his breath in disbelief. Would Oakstar really put aside her anger at their ancestors to acknowledge the importance of Starclan in a warrior's life? Was she about to admit that Cloudpaw had been denied the warrior status she deserved?

Brightheart looked up at the dark reddish-brown she-cat again. "Then do it," he growled.

Oakstar did not react to being ordered around by her newest warrior. As Sandstorm and Cinderpelt looked on, pelts touching for comfort, and Fireheart approached to bear silent witness, the Clan leader dipped her head and began to speak. "I ask my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has learned the warrior code and has given up her life in the service of her Clan. Let Starclan receive her as a warrior." Then she paused, and her eyes blazed with anger that burned like cold fire. "She will be known as Lostface, so that every cat knows what Starclan did to take her from us," she growled.

Sandstorm stared at his leader in horror. How could she use this terribly wounded apprentice in her war against her warrior ancestors?

"But that's a cruel name!" Brightheart protested. "What if she lives?"

"Then we will have all the more reason to remember what Starclan have brought us to," Oakstar replied, her voice barely more than a whisper. "They will have this warrior as Lostface, or not at all."

Brightheart held her gaze for a moment longer, the light of challenge in his blue eyes, and then dipped his head as if he knew there was no point in arguing.

"Let Starclan receive her by the name of Lostface," Oakstar finished. She bent her head and lightly touched her nose to Lostface's head. "There, it is done," she murmured.

As if the touch had roused her, Lostface's eyes opened and a look of terrible fear flooded into them. For a moment she struggled back to wakefulness. "Pack, pack!" She gasped. "Kill, kill!"

Oakstar recoiled, her fur bristling. "What? What does she mean?" she demanded.

But Lostface had sunk into unconsciousness again. Oakstar looked wildly from Cinderpelt to Sandstorm and back again. "What did she mean?" she repeated.

"I don't know," Cinderpelt mewed uneasily. "That's all she will say."

"But, Sandstorm, I told you..." Oakstar was struggling to speak. "Starclan showed me an evil in the forest, and they called it 'pack.' Is it the pack that has done this?"

Cinderpelt avoided her eyes, going instead to check on Lostface. Sandstorm sought for an answer that would satisfy his leader. He did not want Oakstar to know that her cats were being hunted down as if they were prey for some nameless, faceless enemy. But he knew that she would not be satisfied by empty reassurances.

"No cat knows," he replied at last. "I'll warn the patrols to be on their guard, but—"

"But if Starclan has abandoned us, *patrols* will not help us," Oakstar finished scornfully. "Perhaps they have even sent this pack to

punish me."

"No!" Cinderpelt faced his leader. "Starclan did not send the pack. Our ancestors care for us, and they would never disrupt the life of the forest or destroy a whole Clan for a single grudge. Oakstar, you *must* believe this."

Oakstar ignored her. She padded over to Lostface and stood looking down at her. "Forgive me," she meowed. "I have brought down the wrath of Starclan on you." Then she turned away toward her den.

Almost as soon as she had gone, an agonizing wail broke out in the main clearing. Sandstorm raced through the ferns to see that Longtail and Silverstream were bringing Swiftpaw's body back for burial. When the limp black and white shape had been laid in the center of the clearing, her mentor crouched beside her, touching her nose to her fur in the ritual position of mourning. One of Swiftpaw's mothers, Tigerclaw, sat next to her, while Squirrelkit and Rowankit, Swiftpaw's half siblings, looked on with wide, scared eyes.

A fresh wave of grief flooded through Sandstorm. Longtail had been a good mentor to Swiftpaw. She did not deserve the pain she was going through now.

Returning to Cinderpelt's clearing, he saw that Fireheart had padded over to stand beside the medicine cat, who was pressing fresh cobwebs onto the blood-soaked dressings. "Maybe she'll pull through," she mewed. "If any cat can help her, you can, Cinderpelt."

Cinderpelt looked up and blinked gratefully. "Thanks, Fireheart. But healing herbs can only do so much. And if Lostface lives, she might not thank me." He caught Sandstorm's eye, and he saw in his face a fear that the injured cat would be unable to cope with her horrifically changed appearance. What future lay ahead for a cat whose scars would remind her forever of this living nightmare?

"I'll still look after her," vowed Brightheart, glancing up from his gentle licking.

Sandstorm felt a burst of pride. If only his former apprentice could show the same unquestioning loyalty to the warrior code, he would

be one of the finest warriors in Thunderclan.

Fireheart gently nosed Lostface and then drew away. "I'll fetch some fresh-kill for you and Brightheart," she meowed to Cinderpelt. "And a piece for Lostface too. She might want something if she wakes up." Determinedly optimistic, she padded out into the clearing.

"I don't want anything to eat," mewed Brightheart. His voice was dull and exhausted. "I feel sick."

"You need to sleep," Cinderpelt told him. "I'll give you some poppy seeds."

"I don't want poppy seeds either. I want to stay with Lostface."

"I'm not asking you what you want; I'm telling you what you need," Cinderpelt retorted. "You kept vigil last night, remember?" More gently, he added, "I promise I'll wake you if there's any change."

While he went to fetch the seeds, Sandstorm gave his kin a sympathetic glance. "He's the medicine cat," he pointed out. "He knows what's best."

Brightheart didn't reply, but when Cinderpelt came back carrying a dried poppy head and shook a few seeds out in front of him, he licked them up without complaining. Exhausted, he curled himself close to Lostface and was asleep within a few heartbeats.

"I never thought he would care for another cat as much as that," Sandstorm murmured.

"You didn't notice?" For all his anxiety, there was a glint of amusement in Cinderpelt's blue eyes. "He's been padding after Cloudpaw—Lostface—for a season now. He really loves her, you know."

Seeing the two young cats curled up together, Sandstorm could believe it.

Sandstorm headed toward the pile of fresh-kill. It was almost sunhigh, but though the rays poured down brightly into the clearing there was little warmth in them. Leaf-bare had come to the forest.

Days had passed since Swiftpaw had been killed and Lostface injured. Sandstorm had just been to check on her, and she still clung to life. Cinderpelt began to be cautiously optimistic that she would survive. Brightheart spent nearly every moment with her; Sandstorm had excused him temporarily for warrior duties so that he could care for the injured cat.

As Sandstorm crossed the clearing, he saw Silverstream emerge from the warriors' den and approach the fresh-kill pile. Darkstripe overtook him before he reached it and shouldered him aside to snatch up a rabbit. Ferncloud, already choosing his own meal, gave Silverstream a hostile glare and the silver tabby warrior hesitated, unwilling to go any closer until the other two warriors had withdrawn to the nettle patch to eat.

Quickening his pace, Sandstorm came up beside his friend. "Ignore them," he muttered. "They keep their brains in their tails."

Silverstream flashed him a grateful glance before picking a magpie out of the pile.

"Let's eat together," Sandstorm suggested, choosing a vole and leading the way to a sunny patch of ground near the warriors' den. "And don't let those two worry you," he added. "They can't stay hostile forever."

Silverstream did not look convinced, but he said nothing more, and the two warriors settled down to eat. Across the clearing, Rowankit and Squirrelkit were playing with Willowpelt's three kits. Sandstorm felt a pang of grief as he remembered how Lostface had sometimes played with them, as if she were looking forward to having kits herself. Would she ever mother her own litter now?

"I can't get over how much that kit looks like his father," meowed Silverstream after watching them for a moment.

"Just so long as he doesn't *behave* like his father," Sandstorm replied. He stiffened when he saw Squirrelkit bowl over one of Willowpelt's much smaller kits, but relaxed again as the tiny golden brown tabby sprang up and hurled herself joyfully on Squirrelkit.

"It must be time he was apprenticed," remarked Silverstream. "He and Rowankit are older than—" He broke off, and a distant, sorrowful expression clouded his blue eyes.

Sandstorm knew that he was thinking of his own kits, left behind in Riverclan. "Yes, it's time I was thinking about mentors," he agreed, hoping to distract his friend from his bittersweet memories. "I'll ask Oakstar if I can mentor Squirrelkit myself. Who do you think would —"

"You'll mentor Squirrelkit?" Silverstream stared at him. "Is that a good idea?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Sandstorm asked, feeling his fur start to prickle. "I haven't an apprentice, now that Brightheart had been made a warrior."

"Because you don't like Squirrelkit," retorted Silvertream. "I don't blame you, but wouldn't he be better off with a mentor who trusts him?"

Sandstorm hesitated. There was some truth in what Silverstream said, but Sandstorm knew that he couldn't give the task to any other cat. He *had* to have Squirrelkit under his own guidance to make sure he stayed loyal to Thunderclan.

"My mind's made up," he mewed curtly. "I wanted to ask you who you think would be good for Rowankit."

Silverstream paused, as if he wanted to go on arguing, then shrugged. "I'm surprised you have to ask. There's an obvious choice." When Sandstorm didn't speak, he added, "Fireheart, you mouse-brain!"

Sandstorm took a mouthful of vole to give himself time to think of an answer. Fireheart was an experienced warrior. She had been an apprentice song with Sandstorm himself, Silverstream, and Ferncloud, and she was the only of the four never to have had an apprentice of her own. Yet something made him reluctant to give Rowankit to her.

Swallowing the vole, he meowed, "I more or less promised Snowkit to Sorreltail. It's only fair I should ask Oakstar if he can mentor Rowankit, seeing as he was disappointed so recently. Besides, he's a fine warrior, and he'll do a good job."

Silverstream's eyes glowed briefly with pride; Sorreltail had been his apprentice, and he was clearly delighted to hear how well the young warrior was doing. Then he twitched his ears disbelievingly. "Come on, Sandstorm. That's not the real reason, and you know it."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't want to give Rowankit to Fireheart because you're afraid of what Goldenstar might do."

Staring at his friend, Sandstorm knew that the silver tabby warrior was right. The reason had been there in his mind, but he had refused to admit it, even to himself.

"You want to protect her," Silverstream went on, when Sandstorm didn't speak.

"And what's wrong with that?" Sandstorm demanded, "Goldenstar already encouraged Darkstripe to take the kits out of camp to visit him. Do you think that will be the end of it? Do you think he'll be content just to see them at Gatherings?"

"No, I don't." Silverstream gave an exasperated snort. "But what will Fireheart think? She's not some pretty little kittypet, hiding behind big, strong warriors. She can take care of herself."

Sandstorm shrugged uncomfortably. "Fireheart will just have to accept the decision. I'm sure Oakstar will agree to let Sorreltail have Rowankit."

Silverstream's blue eyes gleamed in anticipation of trouble ahead. "You're the deputy. But Fireheart isn't going to like it," he predicted.

"You want to mentor Squirrelkit?" asked Oakstar.

Sandstorm stood in her den. He had just raised the question of the new apprentices, suggesting that they should hold the naming

ceremony at sunset.

"Yes," he mewed. "And Sorreltail to mentor Rowankit."

Oakstar gazed at him with narrowed eyes. "A traitor to mentor the son of a traitor," she rasped. Clearly she had no interest in who should mentor Rowankit. "How suitable."

"Oakstar, there are no traitors in the Clan now," Sandstorm tried to assure her, pushing down his misgivings about Squirrelkit.

Oakstar gave a disdainful sniff. "Do what you want, Sandstorm. Why should I care what happens to this nest of rogues?"

Sandstorm gave up his attempt to reason with her. Backing out of the den, he returned to the clearing. The sun was already going down, and the Clan had begun to gather in anticipation of the ceremony. Sandstorm spotted Sorreltail and called him over.

"I think you're ready for an apprentice," he announced. "How would you like to mentor Rowankit?"

Sorreltail's eyes glowed. "Do you really mean it?" he stammered. "That would be great!"

"You'll do a fine job," Sandstorm meowed. "Do you know what to do in the ceremony?"

He paused as Fireheart appeared from the warriors' den and began walking toward him. "Hang on, Sorreltail," he muttered hastily. "I'll be back in a moment." Then he went to meet the flame-colored warrior.

"What's this Silverstream tells me?" Fireheart demanded as soon as he was in earshot. "Is it true that you asked Oakstar if Sorreltail could mentor Rowankit?"

Sandstorm swallowed. Her green eyes were blazing with anger, and the fur on her shoulders bristled. "Yes, it's true," he began.

"But I'm more experienced than he is!"

Sandstorm resisted the urge to tell her the truth, so that Fireheart knew he was doing it for her sake and for no other reason. But telling her that she wasn't going to mentor Rowankit because he wanted to protect her from possible trouble with Goldenstar would make her even more furious. She would only think that he had judged her too weak to deal with the threat posed by the Shadowclan leader.

"Well?" Fireheart insisted. "Don't you think I'm capable of being a good mentor?"

"It's not that at all," Sandstorm protested.

"Then what? Give me one good reason why I shouldn't mentor Rowankit!"

"Because I..." Sandstorm cast around desperately for something he could tell her. "Because I want you to lead extra hunting patrols. You're a *brilliant* hunter, Fireheart—the best. And with leaf-bare here, prey will be scarce again. We're really going to need you." As he spoke, he realized that what he said was true. Extra hunting patrols led by Fireheart would be one way to solve the problems of feeding the Clan through the bitter moons of leaf-bare.

Fireheart, however, was not impressed. "You're just making excuses," she meowed scornfully. "There's no reason why I shouldn't lead hunting patrols *and* mentor Rowankit. She's bright and fast, and I bet she turns out to be a *brilliant* hunter, too."

"I'm sorry," Sandstorm mewed. "I've already asked Sorreltail to take Rowankit. I'll ask Oakstar to give you one of Willowpelt's kits when the worst of leaf-bare is over. Okay?"

"No, it's not okay," Fireheart hissed. "I haven't done anything to be passed over like this. I won't forget this in a hurry, Sandstorm."

She turned away and went to join Lionheart and Whitestorm. Sandstorm took a step after her and then stopped. There was nothing he could say, and besides, Oakstar had just appeared from her den to call the Clan to the meeting.

As the Clan assembled, Sandstorm noticed Silverstream crouching alone not far from the Highrock. Mousefur stalked pointedly past him on his way to sit with the others. Frustrated at the way some of the Clan still refused to accept Silverstream, Sandstorm wanted to go over to reassure him, but he had to stay where he was, ready for his part in the ceremony. A moment later Brightheart and Brindleface appeared from the fern tunnel leading to Cinderpelt's den and settled down alongside the silver tabby warrior, to Sandstorm's relief.

Cinderpelt followed them out of the ferns and limped hurriedly over to Sandstorm. As he drew closer he saw that his blue eyes were sparkling. "Good news, Sandstorm," he announced. "Lostface just woke up and managed to eat some fresh-kill. I think she's going to be okay."

Sandstorm let out a delighted purr. "That's great, Cinderpelt." but for all his relief at the news, he couldn't help wondering how Lostface would cope when he learned that her face was so terribly injured.

"She's already sitting up and trying to groom herself," Cinderpelt went on, "but she's still very shaky. She'll need to stay in my den for a few days yet."

"Has she said anything about what attacked her?"

Cinderpelt shook his head. "I tried to ask her, but it upsets her too much to think about it. She still cries out 'pack' and 'kill' in her nightmares."

"The Clan needs to know," Sandstorm reminded him.

"Then the Clan will have to wait," Cinderpelt assured sharply. "Lostface needs peace and quiet if she's going to get better."

Sandstorm wanted to ask him when he thought Lostface would be fit to talk to him, but he had to pay attention to the ceremony as Tigerclaw came out of the nursery, flanked by her two kits. Sandstorm could see she had groomed both of them especially carefully. Rowankit's dark ginger tabby fur glowed in the dying sun,

and Squirrelkit's dark ginger pelt had a glossy sheen. As they approached the Highrock, Rowankit bounced around with excitement, but Squirrelkit seemed calm, padding forward with his head and tail held high.

Sandstorm wondered if this was what Goldenstar had looked like when he had first been made an apprentice. Had he shown the same promise of courage and a long life in the service of his Clan? Had his Clan leader and his mentor had any idea of what he was destined to become?

Oakstar called both kits forward to stand beside her at the foot of the Highrock. Sandstorm noticed that she was looking more alert than usual, as if even she could not be indifferent to the prospect of more warriors to fight for her Clan.

"Sorreltail," she began, "Sandstorm tells me that you are ready for your first apprentice. You will be mentor to Rowanpaw."

Looking nearly as excited as his new apprentice, Sorreltail stepped forward, and Rowanpaw ran up to meet him.

"Sorreltail," Oakstar continued, "you have shown yourself to be a warrior of loyalty and forethought. Do your best to pass on these qualities to Rowanpaw."

Sorreltail and Rowanpaw touched noses and withdrew to the side of the clearing, while Oakstar turned to Sandstorm.

"Now that Brightheart is a warrior," she went on, "you are free to take on another apprentice. You will be mentor to Squirrelpaw."

Her eyes glittered as she gazed at Sandstorm, and he realized with a flash of horror that she was suspicious of his motives in offering to train Goldenstar's son. Sandstorm tried to meet his leader's icy gaze steadily. Whatever Oakstar thought, he *knew* that he was motivated by loyalty to his Clan.

Squirrelpaw padded toward his mentor, and Sandstorm went over to meet him in the middle of the circle of cats. Looking down into the young cat's eyes, he felt both stirred and challenged by the blaze

of enthusiasm there.

What a warrior he'll make! Sandstorm thought, and then added silently, *If only he weren't Goldenstar's son!*

"Sandstorm, you have shown yourself to be a warrior of rare courage and quick thinking," meowed Oakstar, her eyes narrowed. "I'm sure that you will pass on all you know to this young apprentice."

Sandstorm bent his head to touch noses with Squirrelpaw. As he led the new apprentice back to the side of the clearing, Squirrelpaw asked, "What do we do now, Sandstorm? I want to learn *everything* —fighting and hunting and all about the other Clans..."

In spite of his misgivings, Sandstorm had to admit that Squirrelpaw clearly knew nothing about the old hostility between his mentor and his father. That was thanks to Tigerclaw, who sat looking at them with an unreadable expression. Sandstorm guessed she wouldn't be too pleased that he had chosen to train Goldenstar's son himself And what would happen when Goldenstar found out? He could feel Darkstripe watching him closely and he knew that the dark warrior would take the news to Goldenstar at the next Gathering, if not before.

"All in good time," Sandstorm promised the eager apprentice. "Tomorrow we'll go with Sorreltail and your sister to tour the territory. Then you'll learn where the borders are and how to recognize the scents of the other Clans."

"Great!" Squirrelpaw let out an excited squeak.

"But for now," Sandstorm went on as Oakstar drew the meeting to a close, "you can go and get to know the other apprentices. Don't forget you sleep in their den tonight."

He flicked his tail in dismissal, and Squirrelpaw dashed off to his sister's side as the other cats started to crowd around, congratulating the two new apprentices and calling them by their new names.

Watching them, Sandstorm saw Silverstream get up and come toward him, passing Fireheart on the way. He heard the flame-colored she-cat meow, "Silverstream, aren't you sorry you weren't given an apprentice?"

"In a way," Silverstream replied. He sounded awkward, shooting Sandstorm as sideways glance as he spoke. "I can't expect one for a while, though. Half the Clan haven't accepted me yet."

"Then half the Clan are stupid furballs," asserted Fireheart, giving the silver tabby warrior's ear a lick.

Silverstream shrugged. "I know I'll have to prove my loyalty before I can mentor an apprentice again. And you'll have one soon," he added, as if he could read her mind, "when Willowpelt's kits are ready."

An annoyed look flashed across Fireheart's face. Sandstorm wondered whether he ought to try talking to her again, but as she spotted his hesitant approach she turned to Silverstream and meowed loudly, "Come on; let's see if there's any fresh-kill left."

Sandstorm halted and watched miserably as Fireheart got to her paws and led the way over to the pile of prey. Silverstream followed her, casting a worried glance at Sandstorm as he went.

Seeing Fireheart turn her back on him, Sandstorm felt bitter disappointment welling up inside him. However hard he tried, all his attempts to rekindle the old bond between him and Fireheart seemed to be failing, and he missed her with a loneliness that could not be comforted by any of the other cats that thronged around him.

Chapter 21

"Keep well back," Sorreltail warned. "This is a dangerous place."

He and Sandstorm, with their two apprentices, were standing at the edge of the Thunderpath. Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw wrinkled their noses against its bitter smell.

"It doesn't look dangerous to me," meowed Squirrelpaw. Tentatively he reached out one paw to place it on the dark, stony surface.

At the same moment, Sandstorm felt the ground tremble with the roar of an approaching monster. "Get back!" he snarled.

Squirrelpaw leaped back into the safety of the verge as the monster flashed past, buffeting his fur with hot, stinking wind. He was quivering with shock.

Rowanpaw's eyes were wide with astonishment. "What *was* that?" she mewed.

"A monster," Sandstorm explained. "They carry Twolegs in their belly. But they never leave the Thunderpath, so you're quite safe—as long as you stay away from it." He fixed Squirrelpaw with a stern gaze. "When a warrior tells you to do something, you do it. Ask questions if you like, but *afterward*."

Squirrelpaw nodded, scuffling his paws. "Sorry, Sandstorm."

He was already recovering from the shock; Sandstorm had to admit that many more experienced cats would have been terrified to find themselves so close to a monster. Since they had left camp that morning, Squirrelpaw had shown himself to be brave, curious, and eager to learn.

Fireheart, Silverstream, and Brindleface had gone out on the dawn patrol, while Sandstorm and Sorreltail gave their apprentices the

tour of the territory. Sandstorm had found himself moving with extra stealth along the once-familiar trails, haunted by shadows and afraid at any moment that he could come face to face with the dark presence in the forest.

He had kept well away from Snakerocks, unwilling to risk that accursed place with two new apprentices. Soon, he knew, he would have to do something about the threat that lurked there, but he was waiting until Lostface was well enough to tell them exactly what had attacked her. And deep down Sandstorm couldn't help wondering if, even when they knew, his warriors would be able to deal with it.

"What's over there?" Rowanpaw flicked her tail at the part of the forest on the other side of the Thunderpath.

"That's Shadowclan territory," Sorreltail told her. "Can you smell their scent?"

A chill breeze was carrying the scent of Shadowclan toward them. Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw opened their mouths to taste it.

"We've smelled that before," announced Rowanpaw.

"Oh?" Sorreltail shot a startled glance at Sandstorm.

"When Darkstripe brought us to the border to meet our father," explained Squirrelpaw.

"I spotted them." Sandstorm wanted Sorreltail to know that this wasn't news to him. "I suppose we can't blame Goldenstar for wanting to see them," he added, forcing himself to be charitable.

Sorreltail didn't reply, but he looked faintly worried, as if he shared Sandstorm's misgivings about Goldenstar's relationship with these Thunderclan kits.

"Can we go over there now and see our father?" Rowanpaw asked eagerly.

"No!" Sorreltail sounded shocked. "Clan cats don't go into each other's territory. If a patrol caught us, there would be big trouble."

"Not if we told them Goldenstar's our father," Squirrelpaw insisted. "He wanted to see us last time."

"Sorreltail told you no," Sandstorm snapped. "And if I catch either of you setting one paw across the border, I'll have your tails off!"

Rowanpaw jumped back as if she thought he was going to carry out the threat there and then.

Squirrelpaw's green eyes searched Sandstorm's face for several heartbeats. "Sandstorm," he meowed hesitantly, "there's something else, isn't there? Why will no cat talk to us about our father? Why did he leave Thunderclan?"

Sandstorm stared down at his apprentice. He couldn't see any way of avoiding such a direct question. Long ago, he had promised Tigerclaw that he would tell her kits the truth, but he had hoped for a bit more time to think out exactly what he would say.

He exchanged a quick glance with Sorreltail, and the younger warrior murmured, "If you don't tell them, some other cat will."

He was right, Sandstorm realized. The time had come for him to fulfill his promise to Tigerclaw. Clearing his throat, he meowed, "All right. Let's find a place to rest and I'll tell you."

He retreated several rabbit-hops from the Thunderpath until he came to a dip in the ground sheltered by a few clumps of fern, brown and broken now in the frosts of leaf-bare. The two apprentices followed, their eyes wide and curious.

Sandstorm checked that there were no smell of dog before settling down in a patch of dry grass, tucking his paws under his chest. Sorreltail remained at the top of the slope, keeping watch for danger, from the dog or from Shadowclan territory so close by.

"Before I tell you about your father," Sandstorm began, "I want you to remember that Thunderclan is proud of you. "You'll both make fine warriors. When I'm going to say now won't make any difference to that."

The apprentices' curiosity changed to uneasiness as they listened.

Sandstorm knew they must be wondering what was coming next.

"Goldenstar is a great warrior," he went on. "And he always wanted to be leader of a Clan. Before he left Thunderclan, he was deputy."

Squirrelpaw's eyes glowed excitedly. "When I'm a warrior, I'd like to be deputy too."

Sandstorm's fur prickled at this evidence of his apprentice's ambition, so like Goldenstar's. "Be quiet and listen."

Squirrelpaw dipped his head obediently.

"As I said, Goldenstar has always been a great warrior," Sandstorm continued, forcing each word into the cold air. "But there was a fight with Riverclan over Sunningrocks, and Goldenstar used the battle to kill Redtail, who was the Thunderclan deputy then. He blamed a Riverclan warrior, but we found out what really happened."

He paused. Both apprentices were staring at him with disbelief and horror in their eyes.

"You mean... he *killed* a cat of his own Clan?" Rowanpaw faltered.

"I don't believe it!" Squirrelpaw let out a desperate cry.

"It's true," Sandstorm meowed, feeling sick with the effort of telling these kits the truth about their father's treachery in a way that was loyal to their mother's insistence that the account be unbiased, and would not alienate the kits from their birth Clan. "He hoped he would be made deputy in Redtail's place, but Oakstar chose a cat called Frostfur instead."

"Goldenstar didn't kill Frostfur as well?" asked Squirrelpaw, his voice quavering.

"No, he didn't. Frostfur died in a battle with Shadowclan. Goldenstar became deputy then, but that wasn't enough for him. He wanted to be leader."

He paused again, wondering how much to say. No need to burden

these apprentices, he decided, with the tale of how Cinderpelt had been injured in a trap set by Goldenstar for Oakstar, or Goldenstar's attempts to murder Sandstorm himself.

"He gathered a band of rogues from the forest," he continued. "They attacked Thunderclan, and Goldenstar tried to kill Oakstar."

"Kill *Oakstar*!" Rowanpaw gasped. "But she's our *leader*!"

"Goldenstar thought that he could make himself leader in her place," Sandstorm explained, keeping his voice carefully neutral. "The Clan sent him into exile, and that's when he joined Shadowclan and became their leader."

The two apprentices looked at each other. "So our father was a traitor?" mewed Squirrelpaw softly.

"Well, yes," Sandstorm replied. "But I know it's hard to think about that. Just remember that both of you can be proud to belong to Thunderclan. And the Clan is proud of you, just as I said. You're not responsible for what your father did. You can be great warriors, completely loyal to your Clan and the warrior code."

"But our father wasn't loyal," Rowanpaw mewed. "Does that mean he's our enemy now?"

Sandstorm met her scared gaze. "All cats from other Clans have to have their own interests at heart," he told her gently. "That's what Clan loyalty means. Your father is loyal to Shadowclan now, just as it is your duty to be loyal to Thunderclan."

There was silence for a few heartbeats, and then Rowanpaw drew herself up and gave her chest fur a few quick licks. "Thank you for telling us, Sandstorm. Is it... is it really true that the rest of the Clan is proud of us?"

"It really is," Sandstorm assured her. "Don't forget, the Clan discovered all this when you two were only newborns. And they've never wanted to punish you, have they?"

Rowanpaw blinked gratefully at him. Glancing at Squirrelpaw, Sandstorm saw that he was gazing up at the sky between the

arching fronds of fern. There was no reading the emotion in his green eyes.

"Squirrelpaw?" Sandstorm meowed uneasily. The young cat did not respond. Wanting to reassure him, Sandstorm went on, "Work hard and be loyal to your Clan, and no cat will blame you for what your father did."

Squirrelpaw's head whipped around; his eyes glared at his mentor with all the hostility that Sandstorm had once seen in Goldenstar. He had never looked more like his father. "But that's not true, is it?" he hissed. "*You* blame us. I don't care what you're saying now. I've seen the way you look at me. You think I'll be a traitor just like he was. You'll never trust me, whatever I do!"

Sandstorm stared at him, unable to deny the young cat's accusations. For a few heartbeats he had no idea what to say. While he hesitated, Squirrelpaw sprang to his paws and blundered through the ferns to the top of the hollow, where Sorreltail was waiting. Rowanpaw cast one scared look and Sandstorm and scurried after her brother.

Sandstorm heard Sorreltail meow, "Ready to go? Let's head along the border up to Fourtrees." He paused and called out, "Sandstorm, are you ready?"

"Coming." Sandstorm replied. His heart was heavy as he rose and followed the apprentices. Had he managed to explain to them the true meaning of loyalty, or had he simply succeeded in pushing them further away from Thunderclan, and from him?

As he and Sorreltail led the apprentices back through their territory. Sandstorm kept watch for any signs of the mysterious evil in the forest. He saw nothing; there were no unusual scents, and no signs of scattered prey. The evil, whatever it was, had gone to ground again, and somehow that made Sandstorm more afraid. What was it that could wreak such terrible damage, and then fade into the depth of the forest as if it had never been?

I must talk to Lostface as soon as I can, he decided. The cats were still being hunted, he was sure of that, and it was only a matter of time

before another one was caught.

Early the next morning, Sandstorm emerged into the clearing to find the dawn patrol getting ready to leave. Silverstream and Fireheart were waiting beside the entrance to the gorse tunnel, while Ferncloud was calling Ashpaw from the apprentices' den. Sandstorm hurried toward the entrance, but before he reached it he heard Fireheart meow loudly to Silverstream, "I'm tired of hanging about. I'll meet you at the top of the ravine." Without looking at Sandstorm she whipped around and disappeared.

Sadness almost overwhelmed Sandstorm, and he halted at the mouth of the gorse tunnel, tasting the last of Fireheart's scent as she retreated.

"Give her time," Silverstream meowed, touching his nose to Sandstorm's shoulder. "She'll come around."

"I don't know. Ever since the meeting with Windclan..."

He stopped as Ferncloud and Ashpaw hurried up, and stood back to let the rest of the patrol follow Fireheart. At least, Sandstorm told himself, Ferncloud seemed to be reconciled to Silverstream's return, to the extent of going on patrol with him. Perhaps time was all his friend would need to truly be part of the Clan again.

Sandstorm padded across the clearing to Cinderpelt's den. Lostface was seated in a patch of sunlight with Brightheart beside her, gently washing her. The wounds along her sides were healing cleanly, and her white fur was beginning to grow back, and as he approached Sandstorm thought for a single heartbeat that she was almost back to normal. Then she lifted her head, and for the first time he saw the damaged side of her face without its covering of cobwebs.

Freshly healed scars were stretched across Lostface's cheek, bare flesh where no fur would ever grow. Her eye was gone, and her ear was reduced to a few shreds. Sandstorm realized how dreadfully apt the name Lostface was, and remembered her as she had been before, bright and lively. Anger burned deep in his belly. Somehow he must drive this evil out of the forest!

Lostface let out a faint whimper as Sandstorm approached, and shrank closer to Brightheart.

"It's okay," Brightheart mewed softly. "It's only Sandstorm." Looking up at his former mentor, he explained, "You came up on her blind side. She's scared when cats do that, but she's getting better every day."

"That's right," agreed Cinderpelt, emerging from his den. Limping over to Sandstorm so he could speak to him without Lostface overhearing, he went on, "To be honest, there's not much more I can do for her. She just needs time to get strong."

"How long?" Sandstorm asked. "I need to talk to her—and it's time Brightheart was going back to his warrior duties. I know Fireheart wants him for her hunting patrol." He gave his kin a sympathetic glance, still admiring him for his loyalty to Lostface.

Cinderpelt shrugged. "I'll have to let Lostface decide when she feels ready to leave my den. Have you thought about what's going to happen to her now?"

Sandstorm shook his head. "Officially she's a warrior..."

"And you think she'd be happy among you ruffians in the warriors' den?" Cinderpelt let out a mew of exasperation. "She still needs someone to look after her."

"I think she could go and live with the elders, at least while she's still getting stronger." It was Brightheart who spoke; he had padded over to join Sandstorm and the medicine cat. "Smallear is still grieving in the elders' den for Snowkit. It would do her good to have another cat to care for."

"That's a brilliant idea," Sandstorm meowed warmly.

"I'm not sure," Cinderpelt objected. "What's Smallear going to think? You know how prickly and proud she is. She wouldn't like the idea that you were doing her a favor b trying to distract her from Snowkit's death."

"Leave Smallear to me," Sandstorm meowed. "I'll tell her that *she's*

doing *me* a favor by looking after Lostface."

"That might work," agreed Cinderpelt. "And when Lostface is a bit better, she could help the elders and free up the apprentices for other duties."

"Let's ask her," meowed Brightheart. He bounded back to Lostface's side and pressed close to her. "Lostface, Sandstorm wants to talk to you."

Sandstorm followed. "Lostface, it's Sandstorm." Her ravaged face turned slowly toward him. "Would you like to go and stay with the elders for a while?" he suggested. "It would be a load off my mind if you could help look after them—the apprentices have too much to do as it is."

Lostface gave a nervous start and looked at Brightheart with her one good eye. "I don't have to, do I? I'm *not* an elder."

Brightheart pressed his muzzle against her wounded face. "No one will make you do anything you don't want to."

"But you'd be doing me a favor," Sandstorm added quickly. "Smallear's still grieving for Snowkit, and it will do her good to have a young, energetic cat around." As Lostface still hesitated, he went on: "It's just until you get your strength back."

"And when you're strong again, I'll help you train," Brightheart added. "I'm sure you'll be able to hunt with your good eye and ear. It'll just take a bit of practice."

Lostface's eye began to glow with hope, and she nodded slowly. "All right, Sandstorm. If that's the best way I can be useful."

"It is, I promise. And Lostface"—Sandstorm crouched down beside her and gave her a reassuring lick—"is there anything you can tell me about that day in the forest? Did you see what attacked you?"

Lostface's flicker of confidence died, and she shrank back against Brightheart again. "I don't remember," she whimpered. "I'm sorry, Sandstorm; I don't remember."

Brightheart licked her head comfortingly. "It's all right; you don't have to think about it now."

Sandstorm tried to hide his disappointment. "Never mind. If you do think of anything, tell me right away."

"*I'll* tell you one thing," Brightheart growled. "When we find out who did this to her, I'll make crow-food of them. I promise you that."

Chapter 22

A full moon covered the sky behind thin wisps of cloud as Oakstar led her warriors to the Gathering. Sandstorm was already uneasy. In spite of her declaration of war against Starclan, Oakstar had insisted on going. "How can I trust you to lead the Clan?" she had spat at her deputy when he had asked her which warriors he should take. Sandstorm had simply bowed his head in obedience, but he could still feel the pain of knowing that his leader was convinced he was a traitor.

He also had his doubts about including Silverstream, but his friend had begged desperately to be allowed to come. "Please, Sandstorm! I'll be able to get news of Featherkit and Brookkit," he had meowed. Sandstorm knew that Silverstream was inviting hostility from Riverclan by appearing so soon after the battle at Sunningrocks, and had half hoped that Oakstar would refuse. But the Thunderclan leader had merely flicked her tail dismissively. "Let him come. You're all traitors, so what does it matter?"

Now Sandstorm bunched together with the other Thunderclan warriors to follow Oakstar down the slope. As they emerged into the hollow, the first thing he saw was Goldenstar and Leopardstar sitting side by side, watching approvingly as a group of their apprentices scuffled playfully with each other. Sandstorm's fur crawled as he saw those two together. He still had no evidence that Goldenstar was plotting revenge on his former Clan, but Leopardstar would certainly be feeling hostile after his Clan's defeat at Sunningrocks.

"You've done a good job there," meowed Leopardstar to his companion. "Those are strong young cats, and they've learned their fighting moves well."

A purr rumbled in Goldenstar's chest. "We've made some progress," he agreed. "But there's a long way to go yet."

A pair of tumbling apprentices rolled right up to their leaders' paws

and Leopardstar shifted backwards to give them more room. The young Shadowclan cats were certainly muscular and well fed, Sandstorm thought; he could hardly believe they were the same scrawny creatures who had almost died when the sickness swept through their Clan. He exchanged an uneasy glance with Silverstream; sooner or later, he was sure, Thunderclan would have to meet these skilled fighters in battle.

At a word from Goldenstar the apprentices stopped their playful skirmish and sat up, licking their ruffled fur. The two leaders began to make their way toward the Great Rock. Sandstorm spotted Oakstar already waiting at its base, but he couldn't see Tallstar, the Windclan leader.

As the Thunderclan cats dispersed to meet with warriors in other Clans, he noticed Silverstream hurrying up to a plump gray she-cat with a striped tail, and caught the scent of Riverclan from her. Sandstorm felt a pang of anxiety as he watched his friend. He trusted Silverstream absolutely, even though he would always have one paw in Riverclan while his kits were there. But several Thunderclan warriors would doubt his loyalty if they saw him so eager to talk to a Riverclan cat.

"Frogleap, how are you?" Silverstream greeted the she-cat. "How are Featherkit and Brookkit?"

"Featherpaw and Brookpaw now," replied Frogleap proudly. 'They've just been apprenticed."

"That's great!" Silverstream's blue eyes were glowing as he turned to Sandstorm. "Did you hear what Frogleap said? My kits are apprentices now." He glanced around. "They're not here, are they?"

Frogleap shook her head. "They're too newly apprenticed for that. Maybe next time. I'll tell them you were asking after them, Silverstream."

"Thanks." Silverstream's excitement faded and was replaced by anxiety. "What did they think when I didn't come back from the battle?"

"Once they knew you weren't dead, they coped well," replied Frogleap. "Come on, Silverstream; it wasn't much of a shock. Every cat in Riverclan knew you would go back eventually."

Silverstream blinked in surprise. "Really?"

"Really. All the time you used to spend mooning around on the border or looking across the river. All the stories you told those kits about what you and Sandstorm used to get up to when you were apprentices... It wasn't hard to see that your heart had never left Thunderclan."

Silverstream blinked again. "I'm sorry, Frogleap."

"Nothing to be sorry for," retorted Frogleap briskly. "And you can be sure that your kits will be well cared for. I'll keep an eye on them, and Blackclaw and Stonefur are mentoring them."

"They are?" Silverstream's eyes lit up again. "That's great!"

Sandstorm felt a pang of misgiving. Blackclaw and Stonefur were both fine warriors, but he wondered why they had agreed to mentor Silverstream's kits. Blackclaw had been a good friend to their mother, Graystripe, and so she might be expected to take an interest. But her and her sister had reacted with such hostility when he told them that Oakstar was their mother that Sandstorm was surprised they wanted anything to do with kits who were half Thunderclan. Or was it possible that they wanted to teach the kits to be especially hostile toward their father's Clan?

"You'll tell them how proud I am, won't you?" Silverstream meowed urgently to Frogleap. "And remind them to do what their mentors tell them?"

"Of course I will." Frogleap let out a reassuring purr. "And I know Blackclaw will help you keep in touch with them. Leopardstar might not like it, but... well, what he doesn't know won't hurt him."

Sandstorm had his doubts; after her rejection of Oakstar, Blackclaw might not want anything more to do with Thunderclan. He suspected she would feel more loyal than ever to Riverclan and

Rippleclaw, the cat she had always loved as her mother.

"Thanks, Frogleap," mewed Silverstream. "I won't forget all you've done." He looked around as yowling sounded from the top of the Great Rock to signal the start of the meeting.

Turning, Sandstorm saw that all four leaders were now assembled, their pelts shining in the moonlight as they stood looking down at the cats below. He paid little attention as the leaders formally opened the meeting. Instead, he wondered whether Oakstar would mention the terrible assault on Swiftpaw and Cloudpaw, and whether any of the other leaders had similar news. Sandstorm almost hoped that they had, because that would prove that the dark force in the forest was not a threat to Thunderclan alone, and so had not been sent by Starclan to punish Oakstar's challenge to them. Sandstorm couldn't help thinking it was something greater even than that, a huge shadow that encompassed the whole forest; something that did not know the warrior code and regarded the cats merely as its prey.

When Tallstar had finished, Goldenstar stepped forward. He gave a quick summary of how Shadowclan's training program was progressing, that another new litter of kits had been born, and that three apprentices had been made into warriors. "Shadowclan grows strong again," he finished. "We are ready to take a full part in the life of the forest."

Sandstorm wondered if that meant *ready to attack our neighbors.* He waited with a sinking heart for Goldenstar to make a case for expanding his territory. The Shadowclan leader had paused and was gazing down at the assembled cats as if he had something particularly important to say.

"I have a request to make," he began. "Many of you know that when I left Thunderclan, two kits of mine were in the nursery. They were too young then to travel, and I am grateful to Thunderclan for the care they have given them. But now it's time for them to join me in the Clan where they rightfully belong. Oakstar, I ask that you give me Squirerlpaw and Rowanpaw."

Yowls of protest from Thunderclan warriors broke out before

Goldenstar had finished speaking. Sandstorm was too stunned to join in. He had been concerned all along that meeting with his kits at Gatherings would not be enough for Goldenstar, but he had never expected a public demand for the kits to be handed over to Shadowclan.

Oakstar drew herself up and waited for the noise to die away before she replied. "Certainly not," she meowed. "These are Thunderclan kits. They are apprenticed now, and they will stay where they belong."

"In Thunderclan?" Goldenstar challenged her. "I think not, Oakstar. The kits belong with me, and *my* warriors will take care of their apprentice training."

By that argument, Sandstorm thought, Silverstream's kits should be returned to Thunderclan, although he guessed that Oakstar wouldn't want to reopen that debate with Riverclan. He was relieved to see that Oakstar was not going to back down easily. "Your concern is natural, Goldenstar. But you can be sure that the kits will receive the best possible training in Thunderclan."

Goldenstar paused again, his gaze sweeping around the clearing, and when he spoke again it was not just to Oakstar but to the whole audience of cats. "The Thunderclan leader tells me how well my kits will be trained under her guidance—but Thunderclan has a poor record in looking after its young cats. One kit carried off by a hawk. One apprentice savaged to death and another permanently cripple when they were sent out alone without a warrior. Does any cat wonder that I'm concerned about the safety of my kits?"

Gasps of horror came from all around the clearing. Sandstorm gaped up at the Shadowclan leader. How had Goldenstar learned about Swiftpaw and Cloudpaw? It was too soon for news to have traveled to Shadowclan, except... *Darkstripe!* Sandstorm thought, flexing his claws in anger. That treacherous warrior must have gone straight to Goldenstar and blurted out everything!

In his fury Sandstorm missed Oakstar's reply, and when he made himself concentrate Goldenstar was speaking again. "I don't see what's so difficult," he meowed smoothly. "After all, it won't be the

first time that Thunderclan has handed over kits to other Clans. Will it, Oakstar?"

Fear clenched in Sandstorm's belly. Goldenstar was referring obliquely to Blackclaw and Stonefur. Rippleclaw had told Goldenstar that they had been born in Thunderclan. Sandstorm thanked Starclan that Goldenstar did not know the names of the kits or who their mother was. But what little he knew was more than the rest of Thunderclan.

Sandstorm glanced sideways at Stonefur, sitting only a couple of tail-lengths away. The blue-gray she-cat had drawn herself up, her head erect, and she was staring up at the Great Rock. Her gaze was not fixed on Goldenstar, Sandstorm noticed, but on Oakstar, and the expression in her eyes was one of pure hatred.

Digging his claws into the ground, Sandstorm waited for the Thunderclan leader's response. He could see how shaken she was, and when she managed to reply every word seemed to catch in her throat like thorns. "The past is the past. We must judge each situation on its own merits. I will think carefully about what you say, Goldenstar, and give you my answer at the next Gathering."

Sandstorm doubted that Goldenstar would consent to wait for a whole moon, but to his surprise the Shadowclan leader dipped his head and stepped back a pace. "Very well," he agreed. "One more moon—but no longer."

Chapter 23

Sandstorm padded warily through Tallpines toward the Twolegplace. Heavy rain had fallen the night before, so that wet ash and burned debris clung to his paws. All his senses were alert, not for prey, but for any sign that the dark threat in the forest would emerge to attack his small group of cats as it had attacked Swiftpaw and Lostface.

The injured she-cat was following Sandstorm now, with Brightheart at her side, while Silverstream brought up the rear, watchful for anything that might come upon them from behind. They were on their way to visit Brightheart's mother, Olive. The young warrior had insisted on bringing Lostface with them.

"You have to leave camp sooner or later," he had meowed. "We're not going anywhere near Snakerocks. I'll make sure you're safe."

Sandstorm was amazed at how much Lostface trusted Brightheart. She was obviously terrified by the thought of venturing outside the shelter of the camp. She jumped at every sound, every crackle of leaves under her paws, yet she kept going, and Sandstorm thought he saw in her a return of the courage she had shown when she was Cloudpaw.

When they came in sight of the fence at the end of the Twoleg gardens, Sandstorm signaled with his tail for his companions to stop. He could not see Olive, but when he opened his mouth to taste the air, he caught her scent.

"Wait here," he told the others. "Keep a lookout and call me if there's trouble."

Checking again to make sure there were no fresh scents of dogs or Twolegs, he raced across the stretch of open ground and leaped up to the top of Olive's fence. A flash of white among the bushes in her garden alerted him, and a moment later his sister appeared, picking

her way fastidiously across the wet grass.

"Olive!" he called softly.

Olive halted and looked up. As soon as she saw Sandstorm she bounded over to the fence and scrambled up to sit beside him.

"Sandstorm!" she purred, pressing herself against him. "It's so good to see you! How are you?"

"I'm fine," Sandstorm replied. "I've brought you some visitors—look."

He pointed with his tail to where the other three cats were crouching on the edge of the trees.

"There's Brightpaw!" Olive exclaimed delightedly. "But who are the others?"

"That big silver and black tabby tom is my friend Silverstream," Sandstorm told her. "You don't need to worry—he's much gentler than he looks. And the other cat"—he flinched—"is called Lostface."

"Lostface!" Olive echoed, opening her eyes wide. "What a horrible name! Why did they call her that?"

"You'll see," Sandstorm mewed grimly. "She's been badly hurt, so be kind to her."

He jumped down from the fence, and after a moment's hesitation Olive followed him and padded across to where the three cats waited.

Brightheart ran out to meet his mother, leaving Silverstream with Lostface, and touched noses with her.

"Brightpaw, it's ages since I've seen you," Olive purred. "You're looking wonderful, and haven't you grown?"

"You've got to call me Brightheart now," her son announced. "I'm a warrior."

Olive let out a little trill of joy. "A warrior already? Brightheart, I'm so proud of you!"

While the white queen eagerly questioned her son about his life in the Clan, Sandstorm did not forget that danger might be near. "We can't stay long," he meowed. "Olive, have you heard anything about a dog loose in the forest?"

Olive turned to him, her eyes wide and scared. "A dog? No, I don't know anything about that."

"I think that might have been what the Twolegs were looking for that day Fireheart and I met you in Tallpines," Sandstorm went on. "I don't think you should come into the forest alone anymore, not for the time being, anyway. It's too dangerous."

"Then you're in danger all the time," mewed Olive. Her voice rose in distress. "Oh, Sandstorm...!"

"There's nothing for you to worry about." Sandstorm tried to sound confident. "Just stay in your garden. The dog won't bother you there."

"But I worry about you, Sandstorm, and Brightheart. You haven't got a nest to—Oh!"

Olive had just caught sight of Lostface's damaged side and could not restrain a squeak of horror. Lostface heard her and crouched closer to the ground, uneasiness showing in her bristling fur.

"Come and meet Lostface," Brightheart meowed, giving his mother a hard stare.

Nervously Olive took the few paces that brought her to where Silverstream and Lostface waited. Silverstream nodded to her in greeting, and Lostface gazed up at her with her one good eye.

"Oh, my goodness, whatever happened to you?" Olive blurted out, her paws working on the ground.

"Lostface went out to tackle the dog," Brightheart answered. "She was very brave."

"And it did that to you? Oh, you poor thing!" Olive's eyes were huger still as she took in the full horror of Lostface's injuries—the ravaged face, the lost eye, and the shredded ear. "And the same thing could happen to any of you..."

Sandstorm gritted his teeth. His sister was saying all the wrong things, and Lostface was gazing at her with deep sadness in her remaining eye. Brightheart pressed his flank against her and nose her comfortingly.

"It's time we were going," Sandstorm decided. "Brightheart just wanted to give you his news. You'd better get back into your garden."

"Yes—yes, I will." Olive backed away, her eyes still fixed on Lostface. "You'll come and see me again, Sandstorm?"

"As soon as I can," he promised, and added silently, *alone*.

Olive retreated another pace or two, then turned and dashed for her fence, swarming up it and pausing briefly on the top to meow, "Good-bye!" before b = vanishing into the safety of her garden.

Brightheart let out a long breath. "That went well," he meowed bitterly.

"You can't blame Olive," Sandstorm told him. "She doesn't really understand what Clan life is all about. She's just seen some of the worst of it, and she doesn't like it."

Silverstream grunted. "What can you expect from a kittypet? Let's get home."

Brightheart gently nosed Lostface. As she got to her paws, the young cat mewed timidly, "Brightheart, Olive looked as if she was scared of me. I want—" She broke off, swallowed, and began again. "I want to see myself. Is there a puddle nearby I can look into?"

Sandstorm felt a pang of sorrow for the young she-cat, and admiration at her courage in facing what she had become. He turned his eyes to Brightheart, willing to be guided by the younger cat on what they should do next.

Brightheart looked around for a moment, then pressed his muzzle against Lostface's shoulder. "Come with me," he meowed. He led her to where some of the previous night's rain still lay in a puddle among the roots of a tree, and nudged the white she-cat to the edge of the shining water. Together they stood looking down. Brightheart did not flinch away from what he saw reflected there, and Sandstorm felt another rush of warmth toward his former apprentice.

Lostface stood rigid for several heartbeats, gazing into the water. Her body stiffened and her single eye opened wide. "Now I see," she mewed quietly. 'I'm sorry if the other cats feel upset when they look at me."

Sandstorm watched as Brightheart turned her away from the terrible sight and covered the injured side of her face with slow, gentle licks. "You're still beautiful to me," he told her. "You always will be."

Sandstorm felt almost overwhelmed by his pity for the young she-cat, and his pride in Brightheart for being so faithful to her. Padding over to them, he meowed, "Lostface, it doesn't matter what you look like. We're still your friends."

Lostface dipped her head to him gratefully.

"Lostface!" Brightheart spat suddenly. The venom in his voice startled Sandstorm. "I hate that name," he hissed. "What right does Oakstar have to remind her of what happened every time a cat speaks to her? Well, I'm not going to use it again. And if Oakstar objects, she can... she can go and eat snails!"

Sandstorm knew he ought to rebuke the young warrior for his disrespectful words, but he said nothing. He had a good deal of sympathy for Brightheart's point of view. Lostface *was* a cruel name, a symbol of Oakstar's continuing war with Starclan, given without any thought for the cat who bore it. But the name had been given to the white she-cat in a formal ceremony watched by Starclan, and there was nothing Sandstorm could do about it now.

"Are we standing about here all day?" Silverstream asked.

Sandstorm heaved a deep sigh. "No, let's go." The time was coming when he and his warriors would have to confront whatever had turned them into prey in their own territory.

Sandstorm dreamed he was padding through a forest clearing in newleaf. Sunlight streamed through the trees, making dappled patterns of light and shade that shifted as the leaves stirred in the breeze. He paused and opened his mouth so that he could taste the air. Very faintly he made out a familiar sweet scent, and a quiver of happiness ran through him.

"Spottedleaf?" he whispered. "Spottedleaf, are you there?"

For a moment he thought he could see bright eyes shining at him from the depths of a clump of ferns. Warm breath caressed his ear, and a voice murmured, "Sandstorm, remember the enemy that never sleeps."

Then the vision faded, and he woke to find himself in the warriors' den with the cold light of a day in leaf-bare striking him through the branches.

Still clutching at the last sheds of his dreams, Sandstorm stretched and shook scraps of moss from his fur. It had been several moons since Spottedleaf had first warned him to beware of the enemy that never slept. That had been shortly before Goldenstar attacked the Thunderclan camp with his band of rogues—just when Sandstorm had hoped that the treacherous deputy's exile had sent him away for good.

The thought of Goldenstar reminded Sandstorm of the most recent Gathering. There was no doubt now that the former deputy wanted Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw, and in spite of what he said to Oakstar, Sandstorm was sure that he would not be prepared to wait. Even though Sandstorm was not surprised at Goldenstar's demand, there could be no question of handing them over. Part of Sandstorm would have been relieved to see them go, to put an end to his own feelings of mistrust and guilt, but these were *Thunderclan* kits, and the warrior code demanded that the Clan should do everything to keep them.

A rustle in the bedding behind him told Sandstorm that Fireheart was waking up. He cast an uneasy glance at her. "Fireheart..." he began.

The flame-colored she-cat glared at him as she shook herself and stood up. "I'm going hunting," she spat. "That's what you want, isn't it?" Without waiting for a reply, she padded across the den and prodded Ferncloud. "Come on, you lazy furball," she meowed. "All the prey will die of old age before you get out there."

"I'll find Brightheart for you," Sandstorm offered hastily, and slipped out of the den. Fireheart clearly wasn't going to welcome any attempt to be friendly.

The day was gray and cold, and as he paused to taste the air a drop of rain stung him in the face. On the far side of the clearing Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw were sitting with the other apprentices outside their den. "Squirrelpaw, I'll take you hunting later!" Sandstorm called.

His apprentice got to his paws, dipped his head in acknowledgement, and sat down again with his back to Sandstorm. Sandstorm sighed. Sometimes it felt as if every cat in the Clan had a reason to dislike him.

He headed for the elders' den, guessing that Brightheart would be with Lostface. Even though the injured cat had been in the elders' den for a few days now, Brightheart still spent all his spare time with her. When Sandstorm reached the burned out shell of the fallen tree where the elders lived, he saw the white and ginger tom seated near the entrance to the den. His tail was curled around his paws while he watched Lostface gently examining Runningwind's pelt for ticks.

"Is she okay?" Sandstorm murmured, his voice low so that Lostface would not hear him.

"Of course she's okay," another voice snapped.

Sandstorm turned to see Smallear. The desolate look that she had worn since Snowkit's death had vanished. Her temper clearly hadn't

softened, but her eyes glowed with affection as she looked at Lostface. "She's a fine young cat. Have you found out what hurt her?"

Sandstorm shook his head. "It's a real help that you can look after her, Smallear," he meowed.

Smallear sniffed. "Hmmm. I sometimes get the feeling that she thinks *she* has to look after *me*." She looked sharply at Sandstorm, and he was saved from having to answer by Halftail.

"Did you want something, Sandstorm?" asked the elderly dark brown tabby she-cat, looking up from her washing.

"I was looking for Brightheart. Fireheart's ready to go out hunting."

"What?" Brightheart sprang to his paws. "Why didn't you say so? She'll claw my ears if I keep her waiting!" He dashed off.

"Mouse-brain," muttered Smallear, but Sandstorm suspected that she was as fond of the young warrior as all the elders.

Saying good-bye to Lostface and Halftail, he padded into the clearing in time to see Fireheart leaving at the head of her hunting patrol. Whitestorm was saying good-bye to them, gazing proudly at her foster kit.

"You will be careful, won't you?" she mewed anxiously. "None of us know what's out there."

"Don't worry." Brightheart flicked her affectionately with his tail. "If we meet the dog, I'll bring it back for fresh-kill."

At the entrance to the camp the patrol passed longtail on her way in. The pale tabby warrior was shaking as if cold, and her eyes were staring. Instantly alarmed, Sandstorm crossed the clearing to meet her.

"What's happened?" he asked.

Longtail shuddered. "Sandstorm, there's something I have to tell you."

"What's the problem?"

As he drew closer, Sandstorm caught an unexpected scent on Longtail's fur—the stench of the Thunderpath. The acrid scent was unmistakable, and Sandstorm's alarm turned to suspicion.

"Where have you been?" he growled. "To Shadowclan, maybe, to see Goldenstar? Don't try to deny it; your fur stinks of the Thunderpath!"

"Sandstorm, it's not what you think," Longtail sounded worried. "Okay, I did go that way, but I didn't go anywhere near Shadowclan. I went to Snakerocks."

"Snakerocks? What for?" Sandstorm wasn't sure that he could believe anything the pale tabby warrior told him.

"I've scented Goldenstar there," Longtail explained. "Two or three times lately."

"And you didn't report it?" Sandstorm felt his fur bristle with fury. "A cat from another Clan on our territory—a murderer and a traitor, what's more—and you didn't report it?"

"I... I thought..." stammered Longtail.

"I know what you thought," Sandstorm snarled. "You thought, 'This is Goldenstar. He can do what he likes.' Don't lie to me. You and Darkstripe were his allies now. It was you or Darkstripe who told him about Swiftpaw and Lostface—don't try to deny it."

"It was Darkstripe." Longtail scuffled the dry earth with her paws.

"So that traitor could accuse Oakstar of negligence in front of the entire Gathering," Sandstorm concluded grimly. "So you could help him steal a couple of apprentices from this Clan. That's it, isn't it? You're plotting with Goldenstar to steal his kits."

"No—no, you've got it wrong," meowed Longtail. "I don't know anything about that. Darkstripe and Goldenstar often meet together on the border by the Thunderpath, but they don't tell me what it's about." She glared resentfully. "Anyway, this isn't about the kits at

all. I went to Snakerocks to find out what Goldenstar was doing there. And I found something that you need to see."

Sandstorm stared at her. "You want me to come with you, to Snakerocks—where you admit you've scented Goldenstar? Do you think I'm quite mad?"

"But, Sandstorm—"

"*Silence!*" Sandstorm hissed. "You and Darkstripe were always Goldenstar's allies. Why should I trust what you say now?"

He turned and stalked away. He was convinced that Longtail and Darkstripe were setting a trap for him, just as Goldenstar had once set a trap for Oakstar beside the Thunderpath. If he were mouse-brained enough to go with longtail to Snakerocks, he might never come back.

He found that his paws had taken him to the medicine cat's clearing. As he brushed through the ferns, Cinderpelt put his head out of the cleft in the rock.

"Who—Sandstorm! What's the matter?"

Sandstorm halted, trying to get his anger under control.

Cinderpelt's blue eyes widened in consternation; he padded to his side and pressed his gray flank against him. "Steady, Sandstorm. What got you worked up like this?"

"It's just..." Sandstorm flicked his tail toward the main clearing. "Longtail, I'm convinced her and Darkstripe are plotting against the Clan."

Cinderpelt narrowed his eyes. "What makes you think that?"

"Longtail wants to lure me out to Snakerocks. She told me she scented Goldenstar there. I think they're setting a trap for me."

Dismay spread over the medicine cat's face, but when he spoke his words were not what Sandstorm had expected.

"Sandstorm—do you know how much you sound like Oakstar?"

Sandstorm opened his mouth to reply, and could not. What did Cinderpelt mean? He was *nothing* like Oakstar, with her irrational fears that every cat in the Clan was trying to betray her. Or was he? He forced himself to relax, letting the fur on his shoulders lie flat again.

"Come on, Sandstorm," Cinderpelt urged. "If she meant to lead you into a trap with Goldenstar, would she *tell* you she'd scented him? Even Longtail isn't as mouse-brained as that!"

"I... suppose not," Sandstorm admitted reluctantly.

"Then why don't you go and ask her what it's all about?" As he hesitated, he added, "I know her and Darkstripe were Goldenstar's friends when he was here, but Longtail at least seems to be loyal to the Clan now. Besides, if she *is* tempted to betray the Clan, you won't help by refusing to listen when she tries to tell you something. That's just pushing her into Goldenstar's paws."

"I know." Sandstorm sighed. "I'm sorry, Cinderpelt."

Cinderpelt let out a little purr and touched his nose to his. "Go and talk to her. I'll come with you."

Bracing himself, Sandstorm headed out into the clearing again, looking around for Longtail. A chill ran through him as he realized that he might have already driven the pale tabby warrior out in search of Goldenstar, but when he checked the warriors' den she was there, crouched in a huddle with Brindleface.

"Brindleface, you've got to listen to me," Longtail was meowing as Sandstorm and Cinderpelt entered. There was real fear in her voice. "Sandstorm thinks I'm a traitor, and he won't have anything to do with me."

"Well, it seems like you've been meeting Goldenstar and telling him our news," Brindleface pointed out reasonably.

"Not *me*—Darkstripe," Longtail protested.

Brindleface shrugged, as if he weren't interested in arguing. "All right, go on. What's the problem?"

"There are dogs living at Snakerocks," Longtail blurted out.

"Dogs? Have you seen them?" Sandstorm interrupted. Both his warriors looked up as he padded over to them, with Cinderpelt just behind.

"You're sure you want to hear?" Longtail said accusingly. "You're not going to charge me with plotting again, are you?"

"I'm sorry about that," Sandstorm mewed. "Tell me about the dog."

"*Dogs*, Sandstorm," meowed Longtail. "A whole pack of them." Sandstorm's blood turned to ice at the word *pack*, but he said nothing, and Longtail went on. "I told you I scented Goldenstar over at Snakerocks. I... I thought I should warn him about the danger there—and I wanted to know what he was doing so far into Thunderclan territory. Well, I found out." He shuddered.

"Go on," Sandstorm urged. He realized how wrong he had been; Longtail really did have important news to report.

"You know the caves?" Longtail meowed. "I was just coming up to them when I saw Goldenstar, but he didn't see me. I thought he was stealing prey at first because he was dragging a dead rabbit along, but he left it on the ground just outside the cave entrance." She broke off, her eyes clouding with terror as she saw again something unseen by the other cats.

"And then?" Brindleface prompted.

"Then this... this creature appeared out of the cave. I swear it was the biggest dog I've ever seen. Forget the stupid things that come with Twolegs. This was *huge*. I only saw its front paws and its head.... Enormous slavering jaws, and you've never seen such teeth." Longtail's eyes were wide with the memory of fear.

"It snatched the rabbit and dragged it into the cave," he continued. "And then the howling and barking started. It sounded as if there were more dogs in there, all fighting over the rabbit. It was hard to

understand what they were saying, but I think they were saying 'pack, pack' and 'kill, kill.'"

Sandstorm stiffened, every limb locked in terror, and Cinderpelt mewed quietly, "Those were the words in my dream."

"And what Lostface said," Sandstorm added. He knew at last what terrible creatures had attacked the young she-cat. He remembered that Starclan had warned Oakstar about a pack. Longtail had discovered the true nature of evil in the forest, the force that had turned the cats into prey, the hunters into hunted. Not a single dog, separated from its Twolegs, but a whole pack of savage creatures. Sandstorm could not imagine where they had come from, but he knew that Starclan would *never* have unleashed such destruction and risked the balance of life in the whole forest. "And you say Goldenstar *fed* these dogs?" he questioned Longtail. "What does he think he's doing?"

"I don't know," the pale tabby warrior admitted. "When he dropped the rabbit, he jumped on top of the rock. I don't think the first dog saw him. Then he went away."

"You didn't speak to him?"

"No, Sandstorm, I didn't. He never knew I was there. I'll swear by anything you like—by Starclan, by the life of Oakstar—I don't know what Goldenstar is doing."

Her fear convinced Sandstorm. He had been expecting an attempt by Goldenstar to steal the kits, but this was something far more complicated. How could he ever have imagined that the Shadowclan leader would give up his grudge against Thunderclan? He realized that he should have been more afraid of Goldenstar all along. Somehow he was linked to the dark force in the forest. Yet Sandstorm didn't know what Goldenstar wanted with the dogs, or what advantage he could gain by feeding them.

"What do you think?" he asked Brindleface.

"I think we need to investigate," meowed the older warrior grimly. "And I'm just wondering how much Darkstripe knows about all

this."

"So am I," agreed Sandstorm. "But I'm not going to ask her. If she *is* in league with Goldenstar, she won't tell us anything useful." Rounding on Longtail, he added, "Don't you *dare* say a word to Darkstripe about this. Stay away from her."

"I... I will, Sandstorm," the pale tabby warrior stammered.

"We still need to know why Goldenstar is taking such an enormous risk, feeding fresh-kill to these dogs," Brindleface went on. "If you want to lead a patrol up to Snakerocks, I'll come with you."

Sandstorm looked upward, judging the light. "It's too late today," he decided. "By the time we reached Snakerocks, it would be getting dark. But we'll go at dawn tomorrow. I'll find out what Goldenstar thinks he's up to, if it's the last thing I do."

Chapter 24

Sandstorm emerged from the warriors' den and paused. He gazed across the clearing to where Fireheart was crouched by the nettle patch, gulping down a piece of fresh-kill. He had chosen some of the warriors he wanted to come with him to Snakerocks, but so far he had not spoken to Fireheart. He was reluctant to risk her life on this dangerous mission, and afraid that she would refuse to come if it meant following his orders. Yet he knew that he could not imagine going without her.

Taking a deep breath, he padded over to the nettle patch and sat down beside her.

Fireheart swallowed the last mouthful of squirrel. "Sandstorm? What is it?"

Quickly Sandstorm told her what Longtail had discovered at Snakerocks. "I want you to come with us," he told her. "You're fast and brave, and the Clan needs you."

The she-cat turned her green gaze on him, but Sandstorm could not read the expression there.

"*I* need you," he blurted out, afraid he was about to refuse. "For Oakstar's sake, as well as the Clan's. I know things haven't been right between us ever since I stopped the battle with Windclan. But I trust you. Whatever you think about me, do it for the Clan."

Fireheart nodded slowly. She was looking thoughtful, and a small seed of hope began to grow in Sandstorm's heart. "I know why you didn't want to fight Windclan," she began. "In a way, I thought you were right. But it was hard to know you had gone behind Oakstar's back without telling the rest of us."

"I know, but—"

"But you're the deputy," Fireheart interrupted, reaching one paw toward him for silence. "You have responsibilities the rest of us can't understand. And I can see how torn you must have felt—between loyalty to Oakstar and loyalty to the Clan." Hesitating, staring down at her paws, she added, "I was torn too. I wanted to be loyal to the warrior code, and I wanted to be loyal to you, Sandstorm."

Sandstorm felt too full of emotion to answer. He stretched out his head to press against her flank, and to his delight she did not move away. Instead she looked up at him again, and he felt as if he were drowning in the depths of her green gaze. "I'm sorry, Fireheart," he murmured. "I never meant to hurt you." His voice barely more than a whisper, he added, "I love you."

Fireheart's eyes glowed. "I love you too, Sandstorm," she whispered. "That's why it hurt so much when you asked Oakstar if Sorreltail could mentor Rowanpaw. I thought you didn't respect me."

"I made a mistake." Sandstorm's voice shook. "I don't know how I could have been so mouse-brained."

Fireheart let out a purr and touched her nose to his.

"I want you beside me always." Sandstorm breathed in her scent, rejoicing in the warmth of her body. He suddenly felt that he would always be happy if he could stay like that forever.

But he knew that he could not. "Fireheart," he told her, lifting his head. "I know what we're going to face out there. It's more dangerous than I ever imagined. I'm not ordering you to come, but I still want you with me."

Fireheart's purr grew deeper, a vibration that filled her whole body. "Of course I'm coming, you stupid furball," she mewed.

Sandstorm set a double watch on the camp that night and kept vigil himself in the center of the clearing. A growing sense of horror crept over him as he listened to the wind sighing through the bare trees. It seemed to carry Spottedleaf's voice to him, murmuring about the enemy that never slept: Goldenstar, the dogs—or both. The enemy was about to unleash its fury, and no cat was safe. The

next day, Sandstorm knew, could see the final destruction of his Clan.

As he watch the moon above him, barely waning from the full, Cinderpelt emerged from his den and padded across the clearing to sit beside him.

"If you're leading a patrol tomorrow, you should get some sleep," she advised. "You'll need your strength."

"I know," Sandstorm agreed. "But I don't think I could sleep." He raised his eyes to the moon again and the glittering stars of Silverpelt. "It looked so peaceful up there. But down here..."

"Yes," murmured Cinderpelt. "Down here I can feel the evil growing. The forest is dark with it, and Starclan cannot help us. It's up to us."

"So you really don't believe that Starclan has sent this pack to punish us?"

Cinderpelt met his gaze, his eyes shining with the reflected light of the moon. "No, Sandstorm, I don't." He leaned toward him and let his muzzle brush lightly against the side of his face. "You're not alone, Sandstorm," he promised. "I'm with you. And so is the rest of the Clan."

Sandstorm hoped he was right. The Clan would survive only if it united and faced this dark threat together. They had supported him in the battle that wasn't fought against Windclan, but would they join him in facing the pack?

After a few moments Cinderpelt asked, "What will you tell Oakstar?"

"Nothing," Sandstorm replied. "Not until we've had a look around, at least. There's no point in upsetting her. She doesn't have the strength to cope with this—not now."

Cinderpelt murmured agreement. He kept watch with him in silence until the moon began to set. Then he meowed, "Sandstorm, I'm telling you as your medicine cat that you need to rest. What happens tomorrow could determine the very future of this Clan, and

we need all our warriors to be at full strength."

Reluctantly Sandstorm had to admit that he was right. Giving Cinderpelt's ear a farewell lick, he got to his paws, padded off to the warriors' den, and curled himself into the moss beside Fireheart. But his sleep was broken, and his dreams were dark. Once he thought he saw Spottedleaf bounding toward him, and his heart lifted in joy, but before she reached him she turned into a huge dog with gaping jaws and eyes like flames. Sandstorm woke, shuddering, to see that the first light of dawn was beginning to seep into the sky. *This could be the last dawn I'll ever see,* he thought. *Death waits for us out there.*

Then as he raised his head he saw that Fireheart was sitting beside him, watching over him while he slept. As he saw the love in her eyes he felt new strength flowing through his limbs. He sat up and gave the she-cat's ear a gentle lick. "It's time," he meowed.

Bracing himself, he roused the cats he had chosen the evening before for his patrol to Snakerocks. Brightheart almost leaped out of his nest, his tail lashing fiercely at the thought of confronting the creatures who had injured Lostface.

Whitestorm, who had been sleeping close the young warrior, awoke with him and followed him to the edge of the den. "May Starclan go with you," she mewed, grooming the scraps of moss out of his fur.

Brightheart pressed his muzzle against hers. "Don't worry," he assured his foster mother. "I'll tell you all about it when I come back."

Sandstorm woke Brindleface and then padded across the den to where Silverstream lay curled up in a pile of heather. Prodding him with one paw, he murmured, "Come on."

Silverstream blinked and sat up. "This is just like the old days," he mewed, in a vain attempt to sound cheerful. "You and me, charging into danger again." He pushed his forehead against Sandstorm's shoulder. "Thanks for choosing me, Sandstorm. I'm scared stiff, but I'll prove that I'm loyal to Thunderclan, I promise."

Sandstorm pressed against him briefly and left the silver tabby

warrior to have a quick wash while he went to wake Longtail. The pale tabby warrior shivered as she crawled out of her nest, but her eyes were determined. "I'll show you that you can trust me," she promised quietly.

Sandstorm nodded, still half-ashamed that he hadn't listened to Longtail the night before. "The Clan needs you, Longtail," he meowed. "Far more than Goldenstar and Darkstripe need you, believe me."

Longtail brightened at that and followed Sandstorm with the other warriors out to the nettle patch. They gulped down fresh-kill while Sandstorm quickly reminded them of what Longtail had told him the day before. "We're going to investigate," he meowed. "We can't decide how to get rid of these dogs until we know exactly what we have to face. We're not going to attack them, not yet—have you got that, Brightheart?"

Brightheart's blue eyes burned into his, and he did not reply.

"I won't take you, Brightheart, unless you promise to do as you're told without question."

"Oh, all right." The tip of Brightheart's tail flicked irritably. 'I want every last dog turned into crow-food, but I'll do it your way, Sandstorm."

"Good." Sandstorm's gaze swept over the rest of the patrol. "Any questions?"

"What if we come across Goldenstar?" asked Fireheart.

"A cat from another Clan on our territory?" Sandstorm bared his teeth. "Yes, you can attack *him*."

Brightheart let out a growl of satisfaction.

Gulping down the last of his fresh-kill, Sandstorm led the way out of the camp and up the ravine. Although the sun had nearly risen, clouds covered the sky, and shadows still lay thick among the trees. There was a strong smell of rabbit not far from the camp, but Sandstorm ignored it. There was no time to hunt.

The warriors advanced warily in single file with Sandstorm in the lead and Brindleface keeping watch at the rear. After what he had learned from Longtail, Sandstorm felt even more strongly that the familiar forest had become full of danger, and his fur prickled with the expectation of attack.

All was quiet until they drew close to Snakerocks. Sandstorm was just considering the best way to approach the caves when Silverstream mewed, "What's that?"

He plunged into a clump of dead bracken. A moment later Sandstorm heard his voice, strained and hoarse. "Come and look at this."

Sandstorm followed the sound and found Silverstream crouched over a dead rabbit. Its throat had been torn out, and its fur was stiff with dried blood.

"The pack have been killing again," Longtail mewed grimly.

"Then why didn't they eat the prey?" asked Fireheart, coming up to sniff at the limp, gray-brown body. She sniffed again. "Sandstorm, there's Shadowclan scent here!"

Sandstorm opened his jaws and drew the forest breeze over the glands in the roof of his mouth. Fireheart was right. The scent was faint but unmistakable. "Goldenstar killed this rabbit," he murmured, "and then left it here. What for, I wonder?"

He remembered how Longtail had reported seeing Goldenstar feeding the pack with rabbit, and the reek of rabbit that had followed them all the way from the Thunderclan camp. Backing away from the prey, he summoned Brightheart with a flick of his tail. "Go back along the way we came," he instructed. "You're looking for dead rabbits. If you find any, check for other scents, and then come and tell me. Brindleface, you go with him."

He watched the two warriors retreat and then turned to Silverstream. "Stay here and guard this. Fireheart, Longtail, come with me."

Even more cautiously now, pausing to taste the air every few steps, Sandstorm drew closer to Snakerocks. It wasn't long before they discovered another dead rabbit lying exposed on a rock, with the same betraying scent of Goldenstar lingering around it. By the time they were in sight of the mouth of the cave, Sandstorm could just make out the shape of yet another rabbit lying at the edge of the open space in front of it. There was no sign of the pack.

"Where are the dogs?" he muttered.

"In that cave," replied Longtail. "That's where I saw Goldenstar leave the rabbit yesterday."

"When they come out, they'll see the rabbit over there, and they'll scent this one..." Sandstorm was thinking aloud. "And then there's the one Silverstream found..." Understanding hit him like a rock and he could scarcely breathe for fear. "I *know* what Brindleface and Brightheart will find. Goldenstar has laid a trail straight back to the camp."

Longtail crouched down on the forest floor and Fireheart's eyes stretched wide with horror. "You mean that he wants to bring the pack right to us?"

Pictures flashed through Sandstorm's mind of massive, slavering dogs racing down the sides of the ravine and breaking through the fern wall into the peaceful camp. He could see jaws snapping, limp feline bodies tossed high in the air, kits wailing as cruel teeth reached for them... He shuddered. "Yes. Come on; we have to break the trail!"

Not even an order from Starclan themselves could have made Sandstorm try to retrieve the rabbit that was close to the cave mouth. But he snatched up the one that lay on the rock and bounded back to where he had left Silverstream. He set down his burden long enough to meow, "Bring that rabbit. We have to warn the Clan."

Ears pricked in amazement, Silverstream obeyed. They headed back toward the camp, and before they had traveled more than a few fox-lengths Sandstorm spotted Brightheart and Brindleface coming

to meet them, slipping warily through the undergrowth.

"We've found two more rabbit," Brightheart reported. "Both stinking of Goldenstar."

"Then go and fetch them." Rapidly Sandstorm explained what he suspected. "We'll dump them in a stream somewhere and break the trail."

"That's all very well," Brindleface meowed. "You can shift the rabbits, but what about the scent?"

Sandstorm froze. Fear was making him stupid, he realized. The rabbit scent and spilled blood would still lead the pack straight to the Thunderclan camp.

"We'll move the rabbits anyway," he decided swiftly. "That might slow the dogs up. But we've got to get back and warn the Clan. They'll have to leave the camp."

Racing through the forest, ear pricked for the sound of the pack behind them, they headed for the camp. Soon they had more rabbits than they could carry. Goldenstar must have hunted all night to catch this many, Sandstorm thought grimly.

"Let's leave them all here," Fireheart suggested when they were still some way from the ravine. Her flanks heaved as she gasped for breath, and she had torn a claw, but her eyes glittered with determination, and Sandstorm knew that she would run forever if he asked her to. "If the dogs find a good meal, they'll stop to eat it."

"Good idea," Sandstorm meowed.

"It might have been better to leave them closer to the cave," Brindleface pointed out, his eyes dark with worry. "That might have stopped the dogs' coming to the camp at all."

"True," Sandstorm replied, "but there isn't time. The dogs could be on their way already. We don't want to meet them."

Brindleface nodded agreement. They left the heap of rabbits in full view on the trail and sprinted on. Sandstorm felt his heart pounding

wildly. He should have known his old enemy would be connected with the dark force that threatened the forest. Only Starclan knew how Goldenstar had found out that dogs were at Snakerocks, but he was using them to destroy the Clan he hated. As he dashed through the trees, Sandstorm was afraid that it might be too late to stop him.

At the top of the ravine, he paused. "Spread out," he ordered his warriors. "Make sure there's no fresh-kill close to the camp."

They headed down the ravine, ranging from side to side. Brightheart drew ahead, and not far from the entrance Sandstorm saw him stop dead. He was staring down at something on the ground.

"No! No!" His voice was an earsplitting yowl, and Sandstorm's fur bristled in horror.

"No!" Brightheart yowled again. "Sandstorm!"

Sandstorm dashed to the warrior's side. Brightheart was standing stiff-legged, every hair in his pelt on end as if he were facing an enemy. His eyes were fixed on the limp heap of white fur huddled at his paws.

"Why, Sandstorm?" Brightheart wailed. "Why her?"

Sandstorm knew, but rage and grief made it hard to speak. "Because Goldenstar wants the pack to get a taste for cat blood," he rasped.

The dead cat lying in front of them was Whitestorm.

Chapter 25

Brightheart and Fireheart carried Whitestorm's body back to the camp, but there was no time for the mourning rituals. Apparently she had gone out hunting early alone very early, and the other cats had only just noticed that she was taking a long time to return. Her burial was a hurried affair, carried out by Brightheart and her two kits, Dustpaw and Ashpaw, while Sandstorm summoned the Clan together.

They returned as Sandstorm stood at the foot of the Highrock waiting for the rest of the cats to gather. Brightheart paced back and forth, his tail lashing fiercely.

"I'll *flay* Goldenstar!" he vowed. "I'll scatter his entrail from here to Highstones. He's mine, Sandstorm, and don't you forget it."

"And don't you forget that you're under my orders," Sandstorm told him. "Right now we have to deal with the dog pack. We'll worry about Goldenstar later."

Brightheart bared his teeth with a hiss of frustration, but did not argue.

Meanwhile the rest of the Clan was huddling in a shocked and silent crowd around Sandstorm. Cinderpelt appeared from Oakstar's den and limped rapidly across to him.

"Oakstar's asleep," he meowed. "Better to tell her about this when we've worked out a plan, don't you think?"

Sandstorm nodded, wondering how his leader would react when she found out that all her fears about Goldenstar were true. Would the dreadful knowledge drive her into madness once and for all? Pushing his fear aside, Sandstorm turned to address the Clan. "Cats of Thunderclan," he began. "This morning we discovered that there's a pack of dogs on our territory, living in the caves at Snakerocks."

Murmuring broke out among the assembled cats, along with a few yowls of defiance. Sandstorm guessed that they scarcely believed him, but there was worse news to come. He couldn't help staring at Darkstripe, but the dark warrior's expression was unreadable, and Sandstorm had no idea how much he already knew.

"Goldenstar has been feeding the dogs," he went on, struggling to keep his voice calm, "and he has laid a trail of dead rabbits to lead them right into our camp. You all know what lay at the end of that trail." He dipped his head toward the place outside the camp where Whitestorm had been buried.

He had to signal with his tail for silence as a chorus of wailing broke out. He couldn't help noticing Tigerclaw crouched with her head down as she listened to what Goldenstar had done, and he looked instinctively for the two newest apprentices. Rowanpaw was staring at him with horror in her face, but Squirrelpaw's face was hidden. Sandstorm wondered if he was equally shocked, or if part of him admired his father for carrying out such a bold plan.

When he could make himself heard again, Sandstorm went on: "We have tried to break the trail, but the rabbits have lain there all night, and the pack will follow the scent they left behind. We must all leave—elders, kits, everyone. If the dogs come to the camp they must not find us here."

More sounds of dismay, this time a low, anxious murmuring. Runningwind, an aged, light brown tabby she-cat, called out, "Where shall we go?"

"To Sunningrocks," Sandstorm replied. "Once you're there, climb the tallest trees you can find. If the dogs follow you, they'll think they lost the scent on the rocks, and they won't look for you."

To his relief, the Clan grew quieter now that he had given them definite orders, though the cats still crouched in grief for Whitestorm. Her kits, the apprentices Dustpaw and Ashpaw, were pressed close together with looks of stunned horror on their faces. Sandstorm thanked Starclan that the day, although gray and chilly, was dry, and that there were no sick cats or very young kits to make the journey.

"And what about the pack?" Ferncloud asked. "What are we going to do about them?"

Sandstorm hesitated. He knew the pack was too strong for his warriors to attack directly. Goldenstar would never have led them to the camp unless he had been certain of that. *Starclan help me,* he prayed silently. As though his warrior ancestors had heard him, an idea flashed into his mind. "That's it!" he whispered. "We'll steal the trail." As the cats close by stared at him, he repeated more loudly, "We'll steal the trail!"

"What do you mean?" Fireheart asked, her green eyes wide.

"Just what I say. Goldenstar wants to lead the dogs right to our camp. Fine. We'll let him do that. And when they arrive, we'll be waiting—to take them to the gorge."

Not far from Fourtrees, on the far side of Thunderclan's territory; the river foamed between sheer-sided cliffs. The current was fast and strong, and there were sharp rocks concealed just under the surface. If cats had drowned there, why not dogs?

"We'll need to lure the dogs over the edge," Sandstorm went on, the details of the plan taking shape in his mind as he spoke. "I'll need warriors who can run fast." His green gaze swept the cats around him. "Silverstream, Fireheart, Mousefur and Longtail. Ferncloud. And I'm going myself. That should be enough. The rest of you gather by the camp entrance, ready to move out."

As the cats he had not named began to obey his orders, Sandstorm saw Dustpaw and Ashpaw pushing their way to the front of the crowd.

"Sandstorm, we want to help," Dustpaw begged, fixing her shocked, pleading eyes on Sandstorm.

"I said warriors," Sandstorm reminded her gently.

"But Whitestorm was our mother," protested Ashpaw. "Please, Sandstorm. We want to do it for her."

"Yes, take them with you," Brindleface put in, his voice grave.

"Their anger will make them fearless."

Sandstorm hesitated, then saw the intensity in the pale gray tabby warrior's eyes and nodded. "All right."

"And what about *me*?" Brightheart demanded, his tail beginning to lash again.

"Listen, Brightheart," Sandstorm meowed. "I can't take all my best warriors to lure the dogs. Some of you have to look after the rest of the Clan." Brightheart opened his mouth to argue, but Sandstorm went on quickly: "I'm not giving you an easy job. If we fail, you're likely to find yourself fighting the dogs—and maybe Shadowclan as well. *Think*, Brightheart," he urged as the warrior still looked unconvinced. "What better revenge could you take on Goldenstar than to make sure that his plans fail and that Thunderclan survives?"

Brightheart was silent for a moment, his face twisted in grief and anger for Whitestorm.

"Don't forget Lostface," Sandstorm meowed quietly. "She'll need you now more than ever."

The young warrior straightened up at the mention of his injured friend and glanced across the clearing to see her limping toward the entrance, guided by Smallear and the other elders. Her one eyes was staring and her sides heaved with terror.

"Right, Sandstorm." Brightheart sounded utterly determined. "I'm on my way."

"Thank you," Sandstorm called after him as he raced across the clearing to Lostface's side. "I trust you, Brightheart."

As he watched the assembling cats, a movement beyond them caught his eye. Darkstripe was slinking through a gap in the thorn ledge, closely followed by Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw.

Sandstorm shot after them and managed to catch up with them as they pushed their way through the thorns. "Darkstripe!" he snapped. "Where do you think you're going?"

The dark warrior turned. There was a flicker of alarm in her eyes, though she faced Sandstorm boldly. "I don't think Sunningrocks is safe," she meowed. "I was taking these two to a better place. They —"

"What better place?" Sandstorm challenged her. "If you know one, why don't you share it with the rest of the Clan? Unless you mean you're taking them to Goldenstar?" A surge of fury made him long to spring at Darkstripe and claw her, but he forced himself to stay clam. "Of course, the Shadowclan leader wouldn't want his kits to be eaten by the dog pack," he realized out loud. "You're taking them to him before the dogs get here, aren't you? I suppose you arranged all this at the last Gathering!"

Darkstripe did not reply. Her expression darkened, and she would not meet Sandstorm's eyes.

"Darkstripe, you disgust me," Sandstorm hissed. "You knew Goldenstar meant to bring the dog pack down on us—and you never said a word to any cat! Have you no loyalty to your Clan?"

"I didn't know!" Darkstripe protested, her head swinging up. "Goldenstar told me to bring his kits to him, but he never told me why. I never knew about the pack; I swear by Starclan!"

Sandstorm wondered how much worth an oath by Starclan could possibly have in this treacherous warrior's mouth. He swung around to face the two apprentices, who were staring at him, their eyes wide and scared. "What did Darkstripe say to you?"

"N-nothing, Sandstorm," stammered Rowanpaw.

"Only to go with her," her brother added. "She said she knew a good place to hide."

"And you obeyed her?" Sandstorm's voice was scathing. "She's Clan leader now, is she? Or maybe some cat made her your mentor, and I didn't notice? Follow me, all of you."

Whipping around, he led the way across the clearing to where the Clan was gathering near the camp entrance. He was half-surprised

to see that Darkstripe followed him, as well as Squirrelpaw and Rowanpaw. Sooner or later, Sandstorm knew, he would have to have a reckoning with the dark warrior, but there was no time now.

As he reached the other cats, he summoned Sorreltail with a flick of his tail. "Sorreltail," he meowed, "I'm making you responsible for these two apprentices. Don't take your eyes off them, whatever happens. And if Darkstripe so much as sniffs at the, I want to know about it."

"Yes, Sandstorm," Sorreltail mewed, looking bewildered. Nudging the two apprentices, he herded them away, among the other cats.

Seeing Brindleface close by, Sandstorm padded over to him and jerked his head at Darkstripe. "Keep an eye on that one," he ordered. "I don't trust a single hair on her pelt."

Then he addressed the warriors he had chosen to run ahead of the pack. "If you haven't eaten today, I suggest you eat now," he meowed. "You'll need all your strength. We'll go soon, but first I have to talk to Oakstar."

As Sandstorm turned toward Oakstar's den, he realized that Cinderpelt was beside him. "Do you want me to come with you?" he asked.

Sandstorm shook his head. "No. Go and help the others get ready to leave. Do what you can to keep them calm."

"Don't worry, Sandstorm," the medicine cat assured him. "I'll take a few basic remedies with me, just in case."

"Good idea," Sandstorm meowed. "Get Blossompaw to help you. You can leave as soon as Oakstar is ready to join you."

When he looked into Oakstar's den, his leader was awake and grooming her fur. "Yes, Sandstorm? What is it?"

Sandstorm padded into the den and dipped his head. "Oakstar, we have discovered the truth about the evil in the forest," he began carefully. "We know what the 'pack' is."

Oakstar sat upright and watched Sandstorm with unwavering amber eyes as he told her what he and his patrol had seen that morning. As he went on, her face grew blank with horror, and Sandstorm's fears rose again that the discovery would drive her into madness.

"So Whitestorm is dead," she murmured when Sandstorm had finished. Bitterly she added, "Soon the rest of the Clan will follow her. Starclan has sent Goldenstar to destroy us. They will not help us now."

"Perhaps not, Oakstar, but we're not giving in," Sandstorm insisted, trying not to be panicked. "You must lead the Clan to Sunningrocks."

Oakstar's ears flicked. "And what good will that do? We can't live at Sunningrocks, and even there the pack will hunt us down."

"If my plan works, you won't be there for long. Listen." Sandstorm told her how he was hoping to lure the dogs through the forest and drown them in the gorge.

His leader's gaze grew vague, fixed on something Sandstorm could not see. "So you want me to go to Sunninrgocks like an elder," she meowed.

Sandstorm hesitated. Telling Oakstar what she should do was a lot harder than giving orders to Brightheart. "Like a leader," he told her. "Without you there, the Clan will panic and scatter. They need you to hold them together. Besides," he added, "don't forget that this is your last life. If you lost it, what would the Clan do without you?"

Oakstar hesitated. "Very well."

"Then we should go now."

Oakstar nodded and led the way out of the den. The bulk of the Clan—all the cats Sandstorm had not chosen to come with him—were already huddled together near the entrance to the camp. As Oakstar went to join them, Sandstorm flicked his tail to call Brindleface. "Stay beside her," he mewed softly. "Look after her."

Brindleface dipped his head. "You can rely on me, Sandstorm." The glance he exchanged with Sandstorm showed that he understood perfectly how fragile Oakstar's mind was. He padded at Oakstar's shoulder as she led the way out of the camp.

Seeing the pale gray tabby warrior, old but still vigorous, beside her, Sandstorm was struck all over again by how frail his leader looked. But her presence among them would reassure the other cats, especially the elders.

When the last of the Clan had filed out into the ravine, Sandstorm turned to the warriors who remained, crouched beside the burned stalks of the nettle patch. Silverstream and Fireheart met his gaze, their eyes filled with resolution and fear in equal measure. Sandstorm was reminded of the last time he had evacuated the camp, when the fire came, and how three cats had never returned.

But he knew thoughts like that would only push him into panic. He had to be strong for the sale of his Clan. Padding over to his warriors, he meowed, "Are you ready? Then let's go."

Chapter 26

When Sandstorm reached the top of the ravine he halted and turned to Dustpaw and Ashpaw. "You two wait here," he ordered. "As soon as you see the dogs, run straight for the gorge. Fireheart will be next in line. When you see her, climb a tree, and then when the dogs have picked up her trail and gone, head for Sunningrocks."

He looked down at the two apprentices. Their eyes gleamed with fury, grief for their mother momentarily forgotten in their desire to avenge her death. Sandstorm hoped they would remember their instructions and not panic, or even worse, try to attack the dogs by themselves. "The Clan's relying on you," he added. "And we're all proud of you."

"We won't let you down," Dustpaw promised.

Sandstorm left them there and led the others farther into the forest. His ears were pricked for sounds of the dogs, but for now the forest seemed to be waiting under a suffocating silence, as sinister as any howling or crashing of undergrowth. The sound of the cats' breathing and their soft pawsteps seemed unnaturally loud as they padded under the trees.

Soon Sandstorm halted again. "Fireheart, you wait here," he meowed. "I don't want those two apprentices to have to run too far. You're the fastest cat in Thunderclan—you'll need to get a good start on the dogs to give the rest of us a chance. Okay?"

Fireheart nodded. "You can trust me, Sandstorm."

Briefly she brushed her muzzle against his. There was no time for more words, but her love for him glowed in her green eyes, and Sandstorm was filled with a wave of fear for her.

Tearing himself away, he took the rest of his warriors along a line stretching all the way to the gorge, leaving each of them at regular intervals as he went: next Longtail, then Ferncloud, and then

Mousefur. At last he and Silverstream were left alone on the border with Riverclan, as near as they could get to the gorge without leaving their own territory. "Right, Silverstream," he meowed, halting. "You hide here. If all goes well, Mousefur will lead the dogs to you. When they come, head for the steepest part of the gorge. I'll be ahead of you, waiting to take over for the final stretch."

"That will be on Riverclan territory." Silverstream sounded dubious. 'What's Leopardstar going to think about that?"

"With any luck, Leopardstar won't have to know anything about it," Sandstorm replied, remembering how the Riverclan leader had threatened Silverstream with death if he set paw in his territory again. "We can't worry about that now. Stay hidden on our side of the border, and if you see a patrol, don't let them know you're here."

Silverstream nodded and flattened his belly to the ground to crawl underneath the branches of a thornbush. "Good luck," he meowed as he disappeared.

Sandstorm wished him luck in return and went on, more warily now, into Riverclan territory. He saw no Riverclan cats but he scented some fairly fresh traces, which suggested that the dawn patrol had already passed that way. At last he found a place to hide in a hollow at the foot of a rock and settled down to wait. The whole forest was silent, except for the distant roar of water in the gorge.

Sandstorm couldn't help wondering where Goldenstar was now. Safe in Shadowclan territory, he guessed, waiting for his old Clan to be torn apart. Then he could swoop in like a carrion crow and take the Thunderclan territory for his own, gloating over his perfect revenge.

Clouds still covered the sky, so Sandstorm had no way to judge the passing of time, but as each heartbeat followed the last he began to worry that something had gone wrong. Why was it taking so long? Had the dogs caught one of his warriors? Sandstorm pictured Fireheart being ripped apart by those cruel jaws and worked his paws on the hard earth in front of him, extending and sheathing his

claws. He had to force himself not to go back and see what had happened. *What if this was all a huge mistake?* He asked himself. Had he led his Clan into even greater danger?

Then, above the noise of the river, he heard a distant barking. Rapidly it grew closer. The dark force had gained a voice at last, giving tongue as the pack bore down on the cats who become their prey. The sound grew louder still, until it seemed to fill all the forest, and Silverstream appeared, streaking along with his belly almost flat against the ground.

Barely three fox-lengths behind him was the pack leader. Sandstorm had never seen a dog like it. It was enormous, easily twice the size of any Twoleg pet. As it ran, its muscles bunched powerfully under a short black and brown pelt. Its jaws gaped to show a vicious set of teeth, and its tongue lolled. It barked hoarsely as it snapped at the fleeing Silverstream.

"Starclan help me!" Sandstorm whispered, and sprang out of his hiding place.

He just had time to see Silverstream hurtling toward the nearest tree; then all he could do was run. The barking seemed to redouble, and he could feel the hot breath of the pack leader against his hind paws.

For the first time Sandstorm wondered what he would do when he came to the gorge. He had imagined slipping aside at the last moment to let the unsuspecting dogs dash straight over the edge. Now he realized that might not work; the dogs were much, much closer than he had imagined.

Perhaps he would have to leap over himself.

If that's what it takes to save the Clan, then that's what I will do, Sandstorm vowed grimly.

The gorge was close by. Sandstorm emerged from the trees to see nothing but smooth turf between him and the edge of the cliff. Casting a hasty glance over his shoulder, he saw that he was outrunning the dogs, and he slackened his pace a little to let them

catch up. The pack streamed out of the trees behind their leader, their tongues lolling as they barked.

"Pack, pack! Kill, kill!" The words slashed at Sandstorm like teeth.

Then from his other side a heavy weight barreled into him, bowling him over. He fought vainly to get up as a massive paw pinned him by the neck. A voice growled in his ear, "Going somewhere, Sandstorm?"

It was Goldenstar.

Chapter 27

Sandstorm struggled desperately to get free, lashing out with his hind paws to claw tufts of fur from his enemy's belly. The Shadowclan leader barely moved. The reek of his scent was in Sandstorm's mouth and nostrils, and his yellow eyes glared into Sandstorm's own.

"Greet Starclan for me," he snarled.

"Only after you!" Sandstorm gasped.

To his astonishment, Goldenstar released him. Lurching to his paws, Sandstorm saw the Shadowclan leader double back and spring up the nearest tree. Before he had time to wonder what was going on, he heard a deafening howl and felt the ground shake under his paws. He spun around to see the pack leader looming over him, its dripping jaws wide. There was no time to run. Sandstorm shut his eyes and prepared to meet Starclan.

Pain stabbed him as sharp teeth met in his scruff. His limbs flailed helplessly as the dog lifted him from the ground and shook him from side to side. He twisted in the air, struggling to claw eyes, jowls, tongue, but his threatening paws met nothing. The forest spun about him. He was aware of more barking, and the stink of dog was everywhere.

"Starclan, help me!" Sandstorm let out a yowl of terror and despair. This was not just his death, but the end of his whole Clan. His plan had failed. "Starclan, where are you?"

Suddenly a yowl sounded close by. Sandstorm was flung to the ground, the breath driven out of his body. The grip on his neck loosened and was gone. Dazed, he looked up to see a dark reddish-brown shape ramming into the side of the lead dog.

"Oakstar!" he yowled.

The force of his leader's impact had sent the dog staggering to the very edge of the gorge. Its barking changed to a high-pitched howl of terror as its huge paws scrabbled for a grip on the turf. The loose soil crumbled away under its weight and it fell, but as it disappeared over the edge its snapping jaws closed on Oakstar's leg, and wrenched her over as well.

Two of the other dogs, hard behind their leader, could not pull up in time. Blindly they charged over the edge of the gorge and vanished, howling, while the remaining dogs skidded to halt, their fierce barks fading to piteous whimpers. Before Sandstorm could force himself to his paws, they had backed away from the edge and fled into the forest.

Sandstorm staggered to the edge of the gorge and looked over. Water foamed white beneath him. For a heartbeat he glimpsed the gaping muzzle of the pack leader struggling among the waves, before it vanished again.

"Oakstar!" Sandstorm screamed. What had his leader been doing over here? He had sent her with the rest of the Clan to Sunningrocks.

Too stunned to move, Sandstorm gazed down into the river. Suddenly he saw a small reddish-brown head bob to the surface, paws thrashing wildly. Oakstar was still alive! But the torrent was sweeping her downstream, and Sandstorm knew that she was too frail to swim for long.

There was only one thing to do. Yowling, "Oakstar, hold on! I'm coming!" he launched himself down the steep side of the gorge and into the river.

Water clutched Sandstorm like a huge paw and buffeted him from side to side. The icy cold of the torrent took his breath away. His paws worked furiously as he tried to swim, but the force of the current rolled him under. He had lost sight of Oakstar before he even entered the water; he could see nothing but the foam that bubbled all around him.

As his head broke the surface he gasped for air, managing to stay

afloat as the racing torrent swept him downstream. Then he spotted Oakstar again, a few fox-lengths ahead of him, her fur plastered to her head and her jaws gaping. Kicking out strongly, Sandstorm closed the gap between them, and as Oakstar began to sink again he fastened his teeth in her scruff.

The extra weight dragged him down. All Sandstorm's instincts screamed at him to let Oakstar go and save his own life. But he made himself hold on, while he forced his limbs to go on working and bring his drowning leader back to the surface. He almost lost his grip on her as something slammed into them, and he caught a glimpse of a dog rolling over in the current, its eyes glazed with terror as it floundered helplessly and vanished again.

A sudden shadow fell across them and was gone as the current carried them under the Twoleg bridge and away from the looming cliffs. Sandstorm could see the riverbank now and he struck out toward it, but his limbs were aching with weariness. Oakstar was a deadweight, unable to help herself. Sandstorm knew that he could not let go of her to gulp in more air, and his senses began to spin away into darkness as his head went under again.

Barely conscious, he made one more massive effort, thrusting at the water with his paws. But when he resurfaced he could not see the bank, and he lost all sense of direction. His limbs stiffened with panic as he knew he was going to drown.

Suddenly Oakstar's weight grew less. Blinking water out of his eyes, Sandstorm saw another head bobbing in the water beside him, teeth firmly gripping Oakstar's fur. He recognized the black pelt and almost forgot to swim in his shock.

It was Blackclaw!

At the same moment he heard Stonefur's voice from his other side. "Let go. We've got her now."

Sandstorm did as he was told and let Stonefur take his place. The two Riverclan cats propelled Oakstar through the water toward the bank. Without the need to support the heavy she-cat, Sandstorm managed to flounder after them until he felt the river bottom

beneath his paws. On flatter ground now, carried by the river out of the steep-sided gorge, he was able to splash his way to the safety of the bank on the Riverclan side.

Coughing as he gasped air into his straining lungs, Sandstorm shook water from his fur and looked around to see what had become of Oakstar. Blackclaw and Stonefur had laid the Clan leader down on her side on the pebbles. Water trickled from her parted jaws, and she did not move.

"Oakstar!" Blackclaw exclaimed.

"Is she dead?" Sandstorm asked hoarsely, staggering up to them.

"I think she—"

Stonefur was interrupted by a loud yowling. "Sandstorm! Sandstorm! Watch out!"

It was Silverstream's voice. Sandstorm turned to see Goldenstar racing across the Twoleg bridge with the silver tabby warrior hard behind him. As the Shadowclan leader swerved along the bank toward Sandstorm and the others, Silverstream darted in front of the massive tabby and whirled around to face him.

"Keep back!" he snarled. "Don't touch them."

Rage lent strength to Sandstorm. His leader lay on the riverbank, her last life ebbing away; whatever she had said or done, she was still his leader, and he had never intended her to die for the sake of the Clan. And all this was because of Goldenstar!

He bounded upstream to stand beside Silverstream, and the Shadowclan leader halted a couple of fox-lengths away. Clearly he was thinking twice about taking both of them on at the same time.

From behind him Sandstorm heard Blackclaw gasp. "Sandstorm! She's alive!"

He bared his teeth at Goldenstar. "Come on step closer, and I'll throw you in the river with the dogs," he growled. "Silverstream, make him stay back."

Silverstream nodded, unsheathing his claws, and Goldenstar let out a long hiss of fury and frustration.

Sandstorm raced back to Oakstar and crouched down beside her. She still lay on the pebbles, though now Sandstorm could see her chest rising and falling with each jagged breath. "Oakstar?" he whispered. "Oakstar, it's Sandstorm. You're all right now. You're safe."

Her eyes blinked open and focused on the two Riverclan warriors. For a heartbeat she did not seem to recognize them, and then her eyes stretched wide, softening with pride. "You saved me," she murmured.

"Shhh. Don't try to talk," Blackclaw urged her.

Oakstar seemed not to hear. "I want to tell you something... I want to ask you to forgive me for sending you away. Bluefur promised me Rippleclaw would be a good mother to you."

"She was," Stonefur meowed tersely.

Sandstorm tensed. Last time they spoke to Oakstar, the two Riverclan warriors had spat venom at her, hating her for what she had done. Would they turn on her now, defenseless as she was?

"I owe Rippleclaw so much," Oakstar went on. Her voice was faint and uneven. "Bluefur too, for mentoring you so well. I watched you as you grew up, and I saw how much you had to give to the Clan who adopted you." A shudder passed through her body, and she stopped speaking for a moment. "If I had made a different choice, you would have given all your strength to Thunderclan. Forgive me," she rasped.

Blackclaw and Stonefur exchanged an uncertain glance.

"She suffered a lot of pain for her choice," Sandstorm couldn't help putting in. "Please forgive her."

For a heartbeat the two warriors still hesitated. Then Blackclaw bent her head to lick her mother's fur, and Sandstorm felt his legs shake with relief. "We forgive you, Oakstar," she murmured.

"We forgive you," Stonefur echoed.

Weak as she was, Oakstar began to purr with delight. Sandstorm's throat felt tight as he watched the two Riverclan cats crouched over his leader—their mother—sharing tongues with her for the first time.

A furious hiss from Silverstream made him turn his head to see that Goldenstar had taken a step forward. The massive tabby's eyes were wide with astonishment. Sandstorm knew that until now Goldenstar had not known who was the mother of the kits that Thunderclan had given away.

"Don't come any nearer, Goldenstar," he hissed. "This has nothing to do with you."

Turning back to Oakstar, he saw that her eyes were closing and her breath was coming fast and shallow.

"What can we do?" he asked Blackclaw anxiously. "This is her last life, and she'll never make it back to the Thunderclan camp. Will one of you go and fetch you medicine cat?"

"It's too late for that, Sandstorm." It was Stonefur who replied, her voice low and gentle. "She is on her way to Starclan."

"No!" Sandstorm protested. He crouched beside Oakstar and pressed his muzzle against hers. "Oakstar—Oakstar, wake up! We'll get help for you—hold on just a bit longer."

Oakstar's eyes flickered open again, looking not at Sandstorm, but at something just past his shoulder. Her gaze was clear and filled with peace. "Bluefur," she murmured. "Have you some for me? I'm ready."

"No!" Sandstorm protested again. All his recent difficulties with Oakstar faded away. He remembered only the noble leader she had been, wise and inspiring, and how she had mentored him when he came into the Clan as a kittypet. And in the end Starclan had been kind to her. She had come out of the shadows to die as nobly as she had lived, saving her Clan by sacrificing herself.

"Oakstar, don't leave us," he begged.

"I must," his leader whispered. "I have fought my last battle." She was panting in her efforts to speak. "When I saw the Clan at Sunningrocks, the strong helping the weak... and I knew you and the others had gone to confront the pack... I knew my Clan was loyal. I knew Starclan had not turned their backs on us. I knew..." Her voice failed as she struggled to continue. "I knew that I could not leave you to face the danger alone."

"Oakstar..." Sandstorm's voice shook with the pain of parting, and yet his heart leaped to hear that his leader knew he was not a traitor.

Oakstar fixed her amber gaze on him. Sandstorm thought he could already see the shimmer of Starclan in her eyes. "Only a sand storm will save the Clan," she murmured, and Sandstorm remembered the mysterious prophecy that he had heard from his earliest days in Thunderclan. "You never understood, did you?" Oakstar went on. "Not even when I gave you your apprentice name, Sandpaw. And I doubted it myself. Yet I see the truth now. Sandstorm, you are the sand storm who will save Thunderclan."

Sandstorm could do nothing but stare at his beloved leader. He felt as if his whole body had turned to stone. Above his head, wind tore the clouds into shreds, letting a ray of sunshine strike down and touch his pelt to sand, just as it had in the clearing when he first arrived in the Clan, so many moons ago.

"You will be a great leader." Oakstar's voice was the merest whisper. "One of the greatest the forest has ever known. You will have the warmth of fire to protect your Clan and the fierceness of fire to defend it. You will be Sandstar, the light of Thunderclan."

"No," Sandstorm protested. "I can't. Not without you, Oakstar."

But it was too late. Oakstar sighed softly, and the light died from her eyes. Blackclaw let out a low wailing sound and pressed her nose to her mother's fur. Stonefur crouched close to her, her head bowed.

"Oakstar!" Sandstorm meowed desperately, but there was no response. The leader of Thunderclan had given up her last life, and goes to hunt with Starclan forever.

Sandstorm rose stiffly to his paws. He had to dig his claws into the earth as his head spun, and for a moment he feared that he might fall into the sky. His fur prickled, and he felt as if his thudding heart would burst through his chest.

"Sandstorm," Silverstream murmured. "Oh, Sandstorm."

The silver tabby warrior had left Goldenstar and walked silently over to watch his leader die. Now Sandstorm saw that his friend's blue gaze was fixed on him with something like awe, and as their eyes met, Silverstream dipped his head in deepest respect. Sandstorm stiffened in horror, longing to protest; he wanted the comfort of their old, easy friendship, not this formal acknowledgement from a warrior to his Clan leader.

Beyond Silverstream, he saw Goldenstar staring at the cats huddled on the shore, amazement and fury in his eyes. Before Sandstorm could say anything, the Shadowclan leader spun around and raced across the Twoleg bridge, back toward his own territory.

Sandstorm let him go. He had to deal with his own terrified, hunted Clan before he tried to settle old scores. But what Goldenstar had done that day would never be forgotten, not by any cat in Thunderclan. "We'll need to fetch some of the others," he mewed hoarsely to Silverstream. "We must get Oakstar's body back to camp."

Silverstream dipped his head again. "Yes, Sandstorm."

"We'll help," Stonefur offered, standing up and facing the Thunderclan cats.

"We would be honored," added Blackclaw, her eyes clouded with sorrow. "I would like to see our mother laid to rest in her Clan."

"Thank you, both of you," meowed Sandstorm. He took a deep breath, drew himself up, and shook his drying fur. He felt as if the

weight of the whole Clan had descended on his shoulders, and yet, in a heartbeat, it began to seem possible that he could bear it.

He was the leader of Thunderclan now. With the death of the lead dog, the threat of the pack had gone from the forest, and his Clan was waiting for him, safe, at Sunningrocks. Fireheart would be waiting for him too.

"Come on," he meowed to Silverstream. "Let's go home."

Wow! 5 books complete! We are almost done with Arc 1! Thank you for reading this little AU! The Darkest Hour will be published shortly!